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JUDGE LYNCH, JR.; or, The Boy Vigilante.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "NICK O' THE NIGHT," "HIDDEN LODGE," "NIGHTINGALE NAT," "DANDY JACK," "OLD FROSTY," ETC., ETC.



THE NEXT INSTANT THE WORD "AVENGER!" SHARPLY SPOKEN FELL FROM THE YOUTH'S LIPS, AND THE CAPTIVE'S HORSE LEAPED FORWARD, STARTLED BY THE SUDDEN BLOW OF RED CREST'S TOMAHAWK HANDLE.

Judge Lynch, Jr.; OR, THE BOY VIGILANTE.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
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LODGE," "NIGHTINGALE NAT," "DANDY
JACK," "OLD FROSTY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GULCH TIGER.

"WAL, I'm back!"
He who spoke thus drew rein in one of the loneliest canyons among the Black Hills.

It was near midnight, and the strange silence that brooded over the spot added a vivid supernaturalness to time and place.

"Back this time to stay!—back on a mission of the utmost importance. The old place looks natural. I saw it all the time I war away, had it kinder photographed on my mind. I war just gettin' things in workin' order hyar, when I war called off. Now what shall I do first—hunt for the youngster, or see if the boys are at their old tricks? Mebbe I kin do both at once. I'm goin' to try."

The man looked like a giant on horseback. There was much about his "make-up" that gave him an appearance decidedly brigandish. He had cultivated a crop of black hair until it touched a pair of Atlantean shoulders. His eyes, dark, piercing, and restless, were a living index of a nature, merciless and bloodthirsty. His hat, a huge sombrero, had been worn from "greaser-dom" on the head that carried it to Cutthroat Canyon.

The two revolvers that graced the man's belt seemed his only weapons; but if one had opened his jacket, one would have seen a knife whose handle shone like a silver stick.

Among a thousand motley characters of the Black Hills, this man would have been selected for any work that required nerve, bloodshed and cunning.

Tom Terror, as he was fitly named, had already made a name which will never be erased from the annals of danger and death that a thousand pens have traced in crimson ink.

His first sentence told that he had been away. This was true.

He had ridden from Custer City, five months prior to the date of our present romance, with a rope about his neck, and in the midst of a score of the most determined men that ever hung an outlaw.

But the bird in the hand on that occasion did not prove worth two in the bush.

The Vigilantes of Custer had made one mistake. Tom Terror had been permitted to ride his own horse to the spot chosen for his exit.

And he rode it further still.

Through the pale moonlight a specter went down the old Deadwood trail, with a score of yelling demons at its horse's heels.

From the neck of the fugitive a long rope whipped and fluttered in the wind.

The flying ghost was Tom Terror, his pursuers, the Custer City avengers.

A word to his horse had been sufficient.

A wild snort, a leap forward like a startled stag, a dozen pistol-shots, a lot of charging men told the story of how the bird in the hand got back to the bush.

And now Tom Terror had returned to the canyon through which he had galloped with a rope around his neck.

He had enemies to punish.

Had he come back for that purpose? Not exactly; but he had a mission which was fraught with death, all the same.

He had come back to hunt and to kill!

"Ha! ha! They're not after me now," continued the giant, "I don't wear the necktie that they gave me on that occasion," and his rongh hand felt his short stretch of throat. "A fellar seldom wears it more'n once in this country. I've had my trial; don't want another. If I've got to die with my boots on, an' I guess that's to be my end, I prefer goin' out with my feet on the ground or in the stirrup."

The speaker took up the reins which had fallen upon his horse's neck, and prepared to move on.

The full-orbed summer moon was directly overhead; her light came down through the gap like a silver mist. The gigantic walls, towering hundreds of feet above the outlaw, had changed from dark to gray. The wind, too, was rising.

If there had been any poetry in Tom Terror's heart he might have admired the fantastic pictures that the moonlight sketched on the sides of the canyon walls.

He saw the shadows, but took no notice of them.

But, if an Indian's face had been outlined anywhere, he would have seen it in a moment.

"Ho! I'm not the only devil out!" fell suddenly from his lips. "Am I to find the red boys so soon after my return? Thunder and shot! This is luck worthy the gods!"

While the gap-seeker's countenance told that he expected to encounter some person or persons whom he would be pleased to meet, he took good care to guide his horse to the foot of the right hand wall, where shadows of Egyptian darkness lay.

"Comin'! comin'!" he murmured, as he waited with a cocked revolver in each hand. "I'm sart'in it ar' the boys; but I might as well prepare for suthin' else!"

A man who carries his vagabondish life in his hands, must hear sounds that would not startle the ordinary mortal. Brigandage had given Tom Terror the hearing of a fox. He kept his dancing eyes turned toward the south, or toward that end of Cutthroat Canyon nearest Custer.

He was admirably hidden. Ten feet beyond his steed's fore feet, the moon had spread a sheet of light over the pebbly bed of the gulch.

An Indian, keen-eyed and acute, might have passed him and never have seen man or horse.

"I war right. The boys are on the old stampin'-ground!" he ejaculated.

Presently the outlines of six or seven mounted figures came in sight.

Tom Terror watched them with eyes that gleamed with eagerness and recognition.

He was not startled to see a party of Indians.

As he looked his lips kept murmuring "The boys! the scarlet boys!"

Tom seemed to experience the pleasure that fills the heart of an exiled chief when he finds himself once more with his men.

The Indians were lightly attired. Not one of the party possessed a gun, but each carried a weapon of death more horrible than the singing bullet.

They came on until they were almost directly in front of the watcher. Their faces were plainly visible in the moonlight. As Tom Terror looked he counted them, to mutter:

"Is it possible that they've been reduced to six? By the jumpin' jingo! somebody's been here since I've been gone! What would they say war I to step out an' say: 'Wal, boys, I'm back?' Gosh all varmints! how they'd jump! An' mebbe I'd get the string before they recognized their old cap'n!"

At that moment the Indians started and looked into each other's faces.

Tom looked toward the north.

"I hear it, too," he said. "By Jove! the boys ar' gittin' the strings ready. Since I'm hyar I'll stan' an' see if they've forgot old Tom's teachin'."

The Indians had drawn a dark cord from their belts. As it swung loose a little ball dangled from one end.

This is what outlaw Tom called "the string."

If he had thrust his hand beneath his doublet it would have encountered a similar object!

As the strings were drawn the Indians disappeared as if by magic among the shadows at the foot of the opposite wall.

The trap was set and the game was about to enter.

Down the canyon came the galloping of two horses.

"Only two!" murmured Tom, disappointedly, but a moment after he added. "So much the better for the boys wth the strings!"

When the game was in sight Tom Terror shrank instinctively against the wall of the canyon, and uttered a cry which he tried hard to suppress.

Instead of two men, he saw a brace of youthful figures.

Although both were clad in masculine apparel the quick eye of the Gulch Tiger detected the dissimilarity of their features, and decided that one belonged to the gentler sex.

The hat worn by this person could not conceal a lot of rich auburn hair, and the garments, revealing a figure whose symmetry was faultless, served to confirm the tiger's suspicion.

This individual's companion was doubtless a boy.

He was strongly built, athletic and youthful handsome. There was spirit in his sloe-black eyes, energy and determination lurked at the corners of his mouth. He did not appear

armed, but Tom could not see his right hand. There was something deadly in that.

A coil of black rope like a lasso hung at the left-hand side of his saddle.

"Thunder an' shot! I've struck all ov 'em—the string boys an' the chap I came back hyar to find. But, whar did he pick that angel up? an' ho is she, anyhow?"

The scrutiny and these half-expressed thoughts were the work of a minute.

On came the twain.

Tom Terror glanced across the gap, but the shadows told him nothing.

"Great heavens! I want the boy!" he cried. "If they give 'em the string I'll get nothin'." Now I must prevent that. I—"

The watcher was interrupted by a half-smothered cry that came from the throat of the boy's companion, as she—if girl she really was—went backward.

A cry pealed from the outlaw's lips.

The boy had darted to the aid of his comrade. He was grasping madly at the little ball flying swiftly around the fair white neck like a crazy satellite.

Before Tom Terror could reach the spot the boy had checked the revolving ball, and the victim of the cord lay in his arms.

"Fiends, you shall pay for this!" he cried. "Ha! you would finish me, too!"

He threw up his right arm as he spoke, and the strange missiles that came from the shadows began to encircle it.

It was the cord of the Thug!

"Ha! ha!" rung out a fearless laugh as the arm was held up in the moonlight for a brief minute. "What a pitiful rope you us! Mine is twice as strong, and I use it, too. Why do I't your devilish leader come back, and give me a chance to use it on him? I wouldn't fail like the men from Custer city did!"

"He hez come back!" roared Tom Terror at that moment. "I'm hyar, you little imp! I've got a warrant for you—the kind that we sometimes serve on a knife."

The boy turned upon the speaker.

"Tom Terror himself, by the land of Nod!" he exclaimed. "But you will not serve your warrant here. Back! back!" He held a pistol in his hand. You can find me almost any day in Cutthroat Canyon. I've been holding court at Satan's Tree. Go down and look at the culprits. I'm glad you've come back. We will make this gap our battle-ground. I try, condemn, and execute. I've a kind of traveling court that sits constantly. I'm judge, jury, prosecuting attorney, and sheriff. Have a care, Tiger Tom! We need no introduction, but here's my card, anyhow."

As the boy ceased, he snatched something from a pocket above his belt and tossed it at the Gulch Tiger.

It struck him in the face and fell upon his horse's neck where it stopped.

"Good night. Follow if you want to, but I hold court in the saddle as often as anywhere. Come, Myra, we must go!"

The boy's last words were addressed to the white face into which he threw a hasty glance.

At the same moment the two horses started forward; their speed soon appeared to rival the flight of an arrow.

Tom Terror did not follow. Bewildered and amazed, he sat still and looked down the canyon.

He was surrounded by the Indians who had urged their horses from the shadows. They were congratulating him on his return; but he did not seem to hear.

"Thar's grit and death in that boy," he muttered. "He's the one I'm after. I can't be mistaken, but I didn't expect to find 'im sech a match for me. His card? Ah! yes, let me see. What does the little gopher call 'imself anyhow?"

Mechanically the Canyon Tiger lifted the card, and held it close to his face. He was not a quick reader; he had to measure letters and mark well their relative position before he could solve any question in orthography.

But he mastered his present task with unaccustomed readiness.

He read:

"JUDGE LYNCH, JR.

"Court always in session! Villains executed with neatness and dispatch!"

"Hangings cheerfully attended to at all hours!"

Tom looked up at the expectant Indians, and gave a long whistle of wonderment.

"Well, this beats my time all holler!" he said. "Judge Lynch Jr., eh? Wal, thar's one fellar what he will never hang!"

Never, Tom?

We shall see

The Indians crowded closer around their chief. He pressed the hand of each, he listened to their voices; but his eyes wandered often down the gulch.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN IN THE STAGE.

The best road that led to Custer City at the time of which we write, ran through Cutthroat; but the depredations committed there by its lawless frequenters rendered travel extremely dangerous.

The cumbersome stage always hustled through during daylight, and even then the driver—and he a man of iron nerve—constantly expected to hear the whiz of the fatal cord.

Custer City then was not what it is at the present day.

It had few redeeming features; its inhabitants had established a court over which "Judge Lynch" presided, and a merciless warfare was waged, as it seemed, on all mankind beyond the precincts of the place.

The stage came into Custer City one day with a dead driver. The heavy lines were still wrapped around his cold hands; but around his neck, serpent-like, was coiled the terrible cord.

It was Custer City's first sight of the Thugs' dread instrument of death.

The stage had been rifled, the mail-sacks cut open, money packages abstracted, and ruin generally committed.

From that day, depredations of similar character became of constant occurrence in Cutthroat. It roused the miners; the terrible Vigilance Committee to which we have already referred was organized. Tom Terror, the ruling spirit of the canyon, fell into its hands, but he escaped with a rope around his graceless neck.

Still the work of plunder and sometimes of death went on. The Thugs still infested Cutthroat. The men of Custer declared that their numbers constantly increased, and the Vigilantes redoubled their efforts.

They had taken an oath to make the road through the gulch as safe as the street of a country village. They wanted people to settle at Custer; above all they desired female society, not the kind that curses many of our frontier towns; but that which would remind them of the mothers and sisters whom they had forsaken for the greed of gold.

All at once a strange discovery was made by the Vigilantes during an expedition through the canyon.

This was nothing less than the finding of two bodies suspended by ropes from a sharp spur of rock that jutted from the dark wall!

It is needless to say that the Thug-hunters drew rein and stared aghast at the hideous spectacle, which the moonlight rendered the more ghastly. A strong wind swung the bodies to and fro.

"Shoot 'em down so we kin see who they ar,'" was a suggestion which was promptly acted upon.

With the cracking of two rifles the bodies shot downward, and fell with a disgusting thud before the trooper.

Their wonderment was increased, for the well-known cord wrapped about the right wrist of each proclaimed their identity.

Some avenger, working independently of the Vigilantes, was abroad!

But, who was he?

A puzzled trooper rode back to Custer, and the news spread like wild-fire.

The Thugs had an enemy who did not pursue in vain; he caught and hung, and that from the points of rocks to which the bravest Vigilante would not have climbed.

Days passed on.

The unknown enemy of the Thugs of Cutthroat continued his work. The Vigilantes found his victims here and there; but he himself was not discovered.

Such was the state of affairs when Tom Terror came back.

Ah! if the men of Custer had known that this human tiger had returned to his old stamping-ground, how quickly they would have sprung to saddle to complete the work which they had inexcusably bungled.

Not many hours after the events related in the foregoing chapter, the Custer City stage entered the canyon.

Already the long shadows of approaching night were falling, and Cutthroat was fast becoming the prince of places for road-agents.

The man who held the lines was eager to reach his journey's end.

A hot box had retarded his progress, and the repeated efforts which he made to keep the

jaded horses at a good speed told that he had no desire to be in the canyon at nightfall.

He cursed his accident almost incessantly; he swore when he applied the cutting lash, and when he saw the shadows grow longer. Old Jack Drivewell was no coward; but he did not want to feel that infernal little cord around his neck.

The stage was apparently empty. If it contained a passenger, he could not be seen; but there were gloomy corners in the old vehicle, large and dark enough to hide a man.

"Go on! go on, for your old master's sake!" cried Jack in a pleading tone, to the horses. "I've got the best kind o' neck fur the confounded string! I kind o' feel it at my windpipe, now; it's the only thing in the world that I'm afraid ov. Git up! blast the hot box! One mile more, an' then—Thunder and guns! just as I expected!"

Instinctively old Jack drew rein.

Before him in the middle of the narrow road stood what seemed to be an equestrian statue.

To the driver, horse and rider wore gigantic proportions, which were rendered more than half ghostly by the prevailing shadows.

"He looks like Tom Terror himself; but—"

The right arm of the specter shot quickly upward. Old Jack saw the deadly revolver clutched in the giant hand.

"Stranger?" he said, in a low tone full of warning as if addressing some one in the stage. "Stranger ar' ye lookin' an' listenin'?"

There was no reply.

"Mebbe the chap's asleep!" muttered Jack to himself, and then, with an oath for his passenger's stupidity, the old driver looked at the man in the bed of the canyon.

He had moved nearer; he might have touched the lead horse with the muzzle of his revolver.

"Hello! Jack!"

"Ar' that you, Tom?"

"Yes; didn't I say I'd come back?"

"Wal, I don't know," drawled Jack. "Fellers what ain't wanted generally come home."

The driver thought he saw a smile at the corners of the Gulch Tiger's mouth.

"So I'm not wanted here?"

"Of course not."

A moment's silence followed. Jack saw the Thug's eyes wander to the stage.

"Empty, Jack?"

"Yes; thunderin' poor trip. This road's got unpopular o' late. Do they know you're back?"

"Guess not."

"May I tell 'em, Tom?"

"If I let you go—yes."

Jack, startled by the Tiger's words, felt a cold chill creep through his veins.

"Jack—Old Jack it used to be while we sifted an' panned on Feather river—why ar' you drivin' stage when that's a gold mine at yer feet?"

"A gold mine?" echoed the driver dazedly.

"Sartainly, an' one that beats the Emma King all hollow."

"Yer tryin' me, Tom. I—"

"No. I want to see you git into better business than ridin' over four wheels at eighty dollars a month. Jack, you're out o' yer sphere up thar. I say come down an' work the mine that lies at your feet."

The driver began to catch the import of Tom Terror's words.

"Hush! Tom," he said, leaning forward. "I hev got a passenger. I lied when I said the stage war empty; but you see we can't generally always tell—"

"When the truth should be told in Cutthroat, eh, Jack?"

"That's about it. Yes, I've got a passenger, but he's been asleep fur six hours, leastwise I hev'n heard 'im in the length o' time. So ef you've business with me go on, but talk lower. What about that gold mine, anyhow?"

Jack Drivewell was all eagerness. He had leaped from his elevated seat, and, standing on the tongue, was leaning over one of the horses with his eyes fixed upon the canyon outlaw.

"I want you, Jack. We used to say that when we struk' a bonanza we'd divide."

"That's so."

"Wal, I'm the first to strike it."

"You, Tom?—a real bonanza?"

"Ef we work it right we kin buy all the mines in this great kentry."

Old Jack flung his whip to the ground.

"I'm with you, Tom!" he cried.

"I thought you would be. But what will we do with the stage an' yer sleepy passenger?"

"Oh, that's easy. I'll wake 'im up an' tell 'im that I've left the business. He kin drive the hoses through to Custer."

Tom Terror's eyes glistened.

"Tue very man I want," he said looking at the old stage-driver.

Jack, springing agilely over the horse, struck the ground, and turned toward the stage.

"That's right; wake 'im up an' start 'im off," said the Tiger.

An eager bound brought Jack to the side of the vehicle.

As the air was bracing, but not cold, the stage was open, and Jack, leaping upon the hub of the left fore wheel, was about to thrust his bronzed face inside when he sprung back with a cry of surprise.

The Gulch Tiger started forward.

What did he see?

He saw two revolvers thrust from the window, and between them appeared a face illumined by a smile of triumph. But the eyes glittered like a snake's; they seemed full of death.

"Great Jehosaphat!" ejaculated Tom. "That's what Jack calls a sleepin' man, is it? Wal, in all my life—"

He stopped.

The lips at the window were talking.

"A deuced pretty game you two vermin are playing," they said. "Jack, I'll deal with you first. Go up or down! I'll give you a minute. If I drive this stage to Custer I'll leave you here with your toes pointing to the stars. I don't waste words. The devil on that horse knows this. Now, Jack, go up or down."

Jack glanced at Tom.

That worthy was staring at the face at the stage window.

"They've met before," Jack muttered, "I guess I'd better go up."

The Canyon Tiger glanced for a moment at the driver and then, lifted his head as if to say, "Go up."

Sullenly and with many a muttered curse, Old Jack climbed to his box again.

At that moment all visions of Tom Terror's bonanza must have vanished from his mind.

"If you attempt a treacherous move, I'll take the lines from you, or rather they'll drop suddenly from your hands."

Jack heard but did not speak.

"Come up here, Tom Terror!"

The revolvers which were covering the outlaw's face carried him forward.

Jack, expecting a conversation between the two, bent down.

"Now do your duty," said the man at the window, in a commanding whisper. "Do not forget for a moment that if you fail—or if you associate anybody with you—I will flood your brains with daylight. You must do it alone, I tell you! The path is before you; at the end of it is a bonanza, a real palpable one; but between you and it is death—death by the trigger I am touching now!"

Old Jack did not hear all; the sentences that fell on his ears were disjointed, but not altogether meaningless.

Therefore, he was not startled to hear Tom say in his usual tone of voice:

"Jack, drive this gentleman through to Custer."

The old driver nodded to Tom, and took up the lines.

The next moment the stage was rolling through the canyon, watched with strange curiosity by the individual whom it left behind.

"Here you ar'!" announced Old Jack as he drew up before one of the young city's hotels, a large wooden structure from which loud voices came. "Here's the Gold Bug, the house whar all my best passengers stop."

The man was on the ground as Jack spoke, and the next instant was walking toward the hostelry.

He entered the bar-room with the air of an old frequenter of such places. His eyes took in the crowd in several restless glances; but, all at once he seemed to shrink from the scene.

"Custer doesn't improve," he said to himself. "They let Indians frequent the hotels. Why does that young buck eye me so? He looks like Red Crest—by Jove! it is Red Crest! Does he recognize me? No! thank Heaven! he's turning away. Maybe I should not have come here. If that young Indian wanted to talk there'd be a rope around Deadly Dan's neck before a minute. But somebody would pass in their checks before the hanging."

He stopped almost suddenly for a hand dropped lightly on his shoulder.

Deadly Dan, as the young man called himself, wheel'd quickly.

He stood face to face with the young buck.

"Brother come back!" ejaculated the Indian, his eyes filled with recognition.

"Yes, and I'm twice as desperate as the starving wolf. Hold your tongue. If you move it again, I'll scatter your brains right and left!"

CHAPTER III.

JUDGE LYNCH AGAIN.

It was plain that the twain who confronted each other in the smoky bar-room had met before.

There was threatful defiance in Deadly Dan's eyes; savage pleasure and revenge in the Indian's.

It would have been difficult to have told which was physically the other's superior.

Both were young.

Deadly Dan had, perhaps, the greatest reach of arm; but Red Crest had a breadth of chest that more than made whole his loss in the other particular.

As they stood face to face and toe to toe, they looked like men who had parted as enemies at a time not far anterior to the present unexpected reencounter.

The young Indian, whose finely-chiseled face proclaimed his tribal identity, did not quail when the white man threw at him the threat with which we closed the preceding chapter.

On the contrary, a twinkle of defiance animated his sloe-black eyes.

"Brother didn't expect to find Red Crest here?"

"Curse you, no! but since we have met—"

"We might make one trail, eh, brother?"

"If that is what you mean, yes!" grated Dan, and the hand that had rested lightly on his hip glided to his revolver.

The quick eye of the Indian detected the movement.

"Not here, brother," he said, quietly, but with unmistakable eagerness in his tone. "Too many here."

"As you please," murmured Dan. "But I thought that the son of the forest might want to die under a roof like decent white people."

For a moment the young Indian did not reply; but when he unsealed his red lips again it was to say: "Come!" as he turned suddenly on his heel.

Deadly Dan sent a quick glance through the crowd, and saw that the incident in which he had just been figuring, had apparently escaped notice.

Red Crest was moving toward the low-browed door, confident that Deadly Dan was at his heels.

"It is the only card I can play; he turned the Jack on me before I had been ten minutes in Custer. I didn't expect to see him here, but we had to meet some time. I must follow him, and—yes, I must kill him!"

Deadly Dan sprung forward in a manner that would have attracted attention if the majority of the crowd, which consisted of the Vigilance Committee, had not been discussing the state of affairs which existed in Cutthroat Canyon.

Outside, in the quiet moonlight which flooded the earth, and revealed the commonplace houses of Custer, stood the Indian.

"Brother here?" he said, as the Sport appeared.

"I never saw you," said Dan. "You've seen me tried before."

Red Crest nodded.

"What fight with?" he asked.

"This."

"Good!" sententiously remarked the Sioux, thus accepting Dan's choice of weapons, which was the beautiful but deadly pistol clutched in his right hand.

A moment later the two were hurrying toward the southern suburbs of the mining "city."

There was something terribly romantic about these representatives of two great races going out to struggle for the mastery at the muzzle of the pistol.

Red Crest being the guide, led the way. They left the town behind, and after ten minutes' walk the Indian halted at what appeared to be the mouth of a little gulch.

"Here!" he said, whirling upon his antagonist.

Deadly Dan for the first time started as if the monosyllable had exploded a shell at his feet.

"I've been a fool—a confounded idiot!" he murmured. "While we were coming down here, I was leaving the golden opportunity slip. I was thinking, but not about the vital interests of the hour—not about the life I was bringing down here to put up for an Indian's target. Not curse me! If I had recurred to business for one brief minute, I would now be going back to Custer alone—yes, alone!"

Did the gleaming eyes of Red Crest discern the thoughts that were flitting through the Sport's brain? If they had not, why did he say: "Red Crest trusted his brother who might have shot him as they walked."

"And you might have winged me," Deadly Dan remarked with a faint smile. "One must fear the other, eh, Indian?"

"Red Crest never fear!"

These words were uttered in a tone of conscious pride, and the young Sioux drew his figure up to its noblest height as he spoke.

"Oh, enough of this. We came here to fight and to kill! But first tell me one thing."

"Well, brother?"

"Have you seen—the boy?"

Red Crest started forward, although he had more than half expected the question.

"Boy down there," he said pointing through the gulch. "Him making a trail that will live long time."

"A trail? What do you mean?"

"Dan find out if he kill Red Crest."

"Then, by the gods! I'm going to find out!" said the Sport to himself.

"Dan hunting boy, eh?" suggested the Indian.

"Who said so?"

"The wolf never leaves the trail of the fawn although he loses it for a few sleeps. The wolf that stands before Red Crest found the fawn once; but the red hunter sprung in between and saved it."

And I said that I would have the blood of Red Crest for that act."

"Red Crest here!" and the young brave's hand smote his breast proudly. "His blood is flowing before the wolf. Let him spill it—if he can."

If the Indian was trying to exasperate Deadly Dan he was not unawarded, for the white stepped back, and the click-click of his pistol smote Red Crest's ears.

"Yes, yes, boy down there. Dan hardly know 'im now. Red Crest saw 'im yesterday."

"Yesterday! would to heaven I had stood in your moccasins, then."

The light of unrestrained curiosity twinkled the Indian's eyes.

"What is the boy to Dan?" he asked. "Why does he come back from the far-off cities of the white people to hunt him like a wolf?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Red Crest eager."

"It is a secret—one that I would not whisper to the winds. But, why need I keep it back when we are to fight to the death—until, probably, both fall dead? I will tell you, Red Crest. I will whisper in your ears the white man's secret."

Deadly Dan stepped forward with the last sentence on his lips.

His eagle-like glance had probably detected that curiosity was mastering the young Sioux.

"Now is my time!" he muttered.

Red Crest had been thrown off his guard. He even went forward to greet the Sport's secret; but the next moment, with the resistless bound of the jungle tiger, Deadly Dan shot forward, and a hand of death and vengeance was at the Indian's throat!

Even if Red Crest had foreseen and braced himself for the tigerish attack, he would not have been able to stand against it.

The vehemence of Deadly Dan's spring lifted the Indian from the ground, and the next instant he went backward only to fall heavily nearer the darkened mouth of the little gulch with the weight of his antagonist on his chest.

The Sport's eyes flashed like restless balls of flame.

"I don't take such an advantage often," he hissed. "But over you, Red Crest, I had to do it. The world, big as it is, is too small for both of us. When I saw you in Custer to-night I thought that the ghost of vengeance had risen from the graves I made on the Rosebud; but when I found out that I was confronted by flesh and blood, and, most of all, by yourself, Indian, I knew that I had to fight for my life. I came out here to kill, not to be killed. Now where is the youngster? You say you saw him yesterday."

The steely eyes of the Indian glittered maliciously. He ground his teeth till they cracked, but it was behind lips shut like a book.

"The boy I say! the blow will come sooner if you keep those infernal lips closed."

Red Crest's eyes wandered to the terrible-looking dirk-knife now clutched by the Sport's hand.

"Dan find boy by 'm by. Red Crest never tell."

"Then the checks that you've carried through

thick and thin, Indian, you pass in here," was the mad answer. "I'll go back to Custer alone—"

"Rope back there for Dan!"

"Thunder and the gods! did you betray me before you left?"

"Let brother go back and see."

Despite his nerve Deadly Dan felt a shudder pass to his heart. His identity was known to the Vigilantes of Custer; the Indian had betrayed him!

Was it for this that he had come to the Black Hills? Was he to perish at the end of a rope held by hands as white as his own?

"I might have known it," he said to himself. "There's a rope behind me now. I must go forward. Tom cannot be far away. We will join hands and work together, and we can win the game with less playing."

Then his eye went down to the Indian beneath him.

"You're a sharp red-skin," he said; "but you've betrayed your last man. Now go and join the brethren I sent downward from the camp on the Rosebud!"

The knife flew upward, armed with vengeance; but the next instant a voice caused Dan to spring erect without having struck the deadly blow.

"If you've no objections, pard, I'd like to take a hand in that game!" said that voice.

"The dirk almost dropped from Dan's hand, and for several moments he presented a splendid picture of amazement as he stood in the moonlight, staring at the individual who had spoken.

Not far away this person stood, and instead of a rough-featured man, more than his match physically, the Sport saw a mere youth at whom he would have laughed if he had encountered him elsewhere.

"The boy, by the cups of Bacchus!" fell from Dan's lips. "This is a meeting most unexpected, and decidedly unpleasant. The youngster's got the drop on me, and there's no reason in the world why he should let up on Deadly Dan. But, he doesn't seem to recognize me. Maybe—"

The Sport's sentence was broken by the sudden spring with which Red Crest regained his feet.

"Brother! brother! See! see! it is the Wolf of the Rosebud!" the Indian cried, turning to the boy. "He is on the trail once more!"

A startling cry came from the youngster's throat as he sprang forward.

The next moment he stood before the astonished Sport.

"Ah! Deadly Dan!" he cried. "Fate brings us together once more. This time the trump card is in my hand. Why should I hesitate a minute—a second? Look boldly into the muzzle of this weapon, and behold the ghastly visage of the King of Terrors."

Deadly Dan instinctively shrunk from the revolver which the boy thrust madly into his face. He was not ready for the fatal bullet.

"No!" suddenly cried the boy. "Brave men die by the pistol; cowards and murderers by the rope! Sieze him, Red Crest!"

A panther-like bound carried the Indian forward; he fell upon Deadly Dan, tore the knife from his hand and made him captive!

"Bring him along!" said the youth, turning away.

The Sport did not resist. The events of the last few moments seemed to have bewildered him.

As he moved along, the Indian completely disarmed him; he was at the mercy of the pair.

When a halt was made Deadly Dan found himself before two horses that stood in the shadow of the gulch walls.

But why two horses?

The boy had evidently ridden one to the spot, but who had sat astride of the other?

"Ah!" thought Dan. "The boy and the Indian were to meet to-night."

"Git up!" said Red Crest, interrupting the Sport's thoughts, and Dan sat astride of one horse.

The boy was already mounted. His dark eyes were glittering like stars.

Red Crest took his position at the head of the Sport's horse, his red hand resting lightly on the bridle-rein.

"One moment, boy," said Dan, turning to the strange youth. "I want to know what this means. Tell Deadly Dan what you are going to do with him. I'm the Wolf of the Rosebud again. I can hear anything."

A smile flitted across the boy's handsome countenance, and he answered by thrusting a card into the Sport's hand.

Dan glanced at it curiously and threw himself back in the saddle until his body was in the

moonlight. Then, holding the card before his eager eyes, he read:

JUDGE LYNCH, JR.

"Court always in session," etc., etc., etc.

The boy and Indian watched him narrowly; but they saw no quivering of the lips as he turned to the former:

"Well, what of it?" asked Deadly Dan. "Yes, boy, what do I care for the rigmarole on this card? You are the self-instituted Judge Lynch, I suppose."

"Judge Lynch at your service," said the boy, doffing his hat with mock politeness. "And I have the honor of informing you, Rosebud Dan, that my court is about to hold a night session."

Before the Sport could reply the horses started forward, and a moment later the party went through the little gulch.

Red Crest, the Sioux, with his hand at Deadly Dan's bridle, trotted tirelessly at the head of his steed.

CHAPTER IV.

MISSSED BY A HAIR.

"THET bonanza what Tom's struck is no one-hoss affair. I'm sart in' of thet. He's down in Cutthroat now, wonderin' of Old Jack's goin' to let the opportunity slip. It's emphatically my chance for a raise—the only one I've had in ten year. Tom come back on purpose to give his old pard a lift—that's fair dealin' an' slich like in 'im; always was. Hyar goes for the bonanza, Jack! Drivewell, mill'nnaire, won't look bad in the papers an' slich places. Good-by, old boys."

Having made up his mind, Old Jack went to each horse and patted his strong neck affectionately. They had been fast friends as beast and master, and there was a warm corner in the old man's heart for each.

He had just unharnessed them from the stage in which he had carried Deadly Dan to Custer City.

That personage was still at the hotel, and, as the driver, mounted on one of his led horses, bade adieu to Custer, he (Dan) was confronting Red Crest in the bar-room.

The thought of a bonanza was enough to stir Old Jack's nature. He had carried millionaires in his stage from the States to Custer and Deadwood; he had noticed that their hands were white, that they smoked, talked and looked like other people. From their conversation he had learned that they had waked up, as it were, to find themselves fabulously rich. They had struck a vein which had poured its silver treasure into their laps.

And why should he not be rich, too? Why should there not be a bonanza for him? even for Old Jack the stage-driver?

He felt that his time had come, as he left Custer and urged his horse toward Cutthroat Canyon. He had long believed, in secret, that his old pard Tom Terror was the leader of the Thugs that infested the famous pass; he was confident of it now, and it would be safe to say that, as he rode along, his neck did not itch as formerly.

Three hours had scarcely passed since his encounter with Tom, therefore he expected to find him near the spot where he had stopped the stage.

Whatever the feeling of security that quieted the deserter's spirit, he drew his pistols as his horse entered the shades of Cutthroat, and then, applying the heavy Mexican spurs which he had strapped to his heels, he went down the canyon like a fugitive from justice.

"Hyar I am, but no Tom," he said, drawing rein on the spot where he had had his adventure with the Gulch Tiger.

"Hyar's whar he told me about the bonanza that beats the Emma King, an' that is whar I stood on the tongue an' listened till I saw Old Jack drivin' a golden carriage through the streets ov Frisco. Why didn't you wait hyar for me, Tom? You might hev knowed that I'd come back just as quick as I could unhitch, an' say good-by to the hosses. Tom, Tom, pard, whar ar' ye?"

The question went up the cliffs, and came back with a thousand strange echoes.

Old Jack was puzzled, and a comical expression of despair came to his face; the bonanza seemed to be slipping through his fingers.

"I thought I had my fingers on it awhile ago, but now—now it seems to be goin' off. Cass the luck! it was always his way. Mebbe, arter all, that's a suter bonanza in my whip and the old stage-road. Tom, old pard, why did you fool me back hyar? If I hed the Emma King I wouldn't swap it fur yer bonanza."

Jack was disgusted, and he had mentally re-

solved to go back to his horses when a sound that made him turn, saluted his ears.

"Ah! Tom, you did come!" he exclaimed, for the Gulch Tiger sat before him as natural as life.

"I didn't think you would come back," was the answer.

"Not for a share in your bonanza?"

"Mebbe I war fooling you, Jack."

The old driver's countenance fell.

Tom Terror deceiving him? Was he awake? Did he hear the Tiger say that the bonanza might prove a gigantic hoax?

"Foolin' me—Old Jack, yer pard?" the old fellow said dazedly. "I've left the route, deserted my hosses, turned my back on Custer—for a share in the big bonanza that beats the Emma King—"

Tom Terror laughed.

Jack gritted his teeth; that cruel cachimata sent the last bird of hope screaming from his avaricious heart. It dissipated his dream of gold.

"Tom, you don't mean all that that laugh said," Jack cried. "Is that really no bonanza?"

"Thar's one for every man, but he must get it for himself!" was the interruption as heartless as the laugh.

"Then—you war—tryin'—me?"

"Mebbe so?"

"He's changed his mind. He wants the holl ov it fur himself; but he's got to share with Old Jack, or his fingers shall never touch one ounce ov its wealth. He has made a tiger outen me. Ef I can't hev one-half ov the bonanza, he sha'n't hev a share."

These fierce, threatening sentences did not reach Tom Terror's ears, but his quick eye saw the movement that accompanied them.

The rough hand of Jack Drivewell had glided to the revolver that rested at his right thigh, but his eye was fixed on the figure before him.

"Hold on, Jack! Draw that weapon and you'll hunt for bonanzas in a kentry where they don't hev any!" said the Canyon Thug sternly, as the driver's hand touched the cleek butt of his pistol. "Go back to the road and you'll strike one some day. Listen to the gold bugs what you carry to Deadwood and Custer; they'll drop you many a stake!"

But Jack's eyes only flashed with a fiercer light as he answered.

"I can't do that, Tom. I've left the road. From this night I'm Old Jack, the Bonanza Hunter."

The reply of the Gulch Tiger was the lifting of his right hand.

"That's the signal!" went through Jack's brain.

Ay, signal it was.

Suddenly, through the air came the whirr of that deadly missile whose work we have already seen.

Jack instinctively threw up his hand, but too late!

The fatal coil struck his meager length of throat, and the leaden ball revolving with hellish rapidity drew it tighter and tighter at each revolution.

Old Jack saw the Canyon Tiger fade into indistinctness; darkness came down the sides of the gulch like a descending pall; he reeled and tried to shriek. Rising in his heavy stirrups, he clutched the deadly cord, and attempted to tear it from his throat; he fought like a man for his life.

But all in vain; he heard a laugh and a series of yells that seemed to emanate from the caverns of the lost, they filled his ears as his hands fell nerveless from his throat, and then his body seemed to go down, down, as if from some dizzy height!

He had merely fallen upon his steed's neck, and the animal struck by the spurs dashed forward.

But a hand shot out and checked its speed. Tom Terror raised Old Jack and looked into his face. It was turning black.

"I hed to cut loose from ye, pard!" he said. "My master made me choose between this and a head with bloody brains. I'll keep the bonanza to myself, Jack. What arn't you dead yet?"

It was with a cry that Tom Terror started from the man about whose neck one of his Thugs, hidden among the shadows, had flung the terrible cord.

No! Old Jack had not succumbed to the grim monster.

He was erect in the stirrups again, clawing at the rope, fighting, but unconsciously, for life.

Tom turned away, and several Indian-like figures leaped from the shadows.

"Finish 'im!" the Tiger said.

The three Canyon Wolves darted toward the writhing man, and the foremost fired point blank at him with a revolver.

Old Jack's hands dropped from the cord, and his horse sprung forward. Then bang! bang! went two more pistols, as the pebbles were loosened by the iron-shod feet, and the victim of the Thugs disappeared from view.

"Let him go!" said Tom, restraining the Indians who were eager to follow. "He'll tell Custer and Deadwood that I've come back to my old stampin'-ground. That string will rouse the hills. The Vigilantes will muster; Maverick Joe and his boys will give us excitement, employment, fun!"

"But something fall from white man down there!" said one of the red Thugs, pointing down the gulch.

"His hat, Lodgepole?"

"No hat; look like ball and string."

Tom started.

"Go and see," he said.

The young Indian sprung eagerly forward, and snatching something from the ground, came back.

"Look!" he said, holding his trophy up to Tom's gaze. "Bullet shot string off."

"Sure as death!" cried the Thug, seizing the object. "Curse the bullet that did this thing."

"But white man dead. Sundance shoot him through!"

"If you did that, it is all right. But if Old Jack Drivewell gets over it, there'll be a general settlement one of these days in Cutthroat Canyon. Now listen to me; we encountered a boy an' a gal last night. You gave the beauty the string, but the boy got away. He is the chap I am looking for. Mind you, I am to settle with him. If you catch him—and catch him you must—you shall bring him to me. Do you understand?"

"We hear our chief!" said Lodgepole. "He shall give the boy the cord."

"That is it!" cried Tom delightedly. "We understand each other now."

"And I understand you all, monsters!"

Quick as thought every Thug turned his face upward, for the voice had come from the star-kissing cliffs overhead.

The next instant a wild cry leaped from the throats of all, and the Thugs dodged shudderingly.

As for Tom Terror, he fairly shrieked as he ducked his unhandsome head, and the next second a stone which would have crushed a giant grazed his hat and was shivered on the bed of the canyon!

"Great Jove! missed by a hair!" gasped the Tiger, and the spurring that he administered to his horse carried him many rods from the almost fatal spot.

Then, white-faced and gasping, he drew rein, and looked up at the cliffs overhead.

"It warn't the boy!" he said. "The voice didn't sound like a human one. I'd call it a speerit, if speerits could handle sich rocks as that. What ar' the boys with the strings?"

"Here, chief."

Tom Terror looked: his band actually surrounded him.

"We must get away from here, for we c'n't dodge sich bullets every time," he said.

"No, monsters! the time is near at hand when they will strike and kill!"

"Great Jehosaphat!" ejaculated the Canyon Terror. "Thar's vengeance and death in the voice. I recognize it now, though I only heard it once. It ar' the voice of the girl who war with the boy last night—the girl what got the string."

The red Thugs did not answer; but their gaze wandered from their chief to the top of the canyon wall.

CHAPTER V.

THE BIG BONANZA.

The horse that carried Old Jack from the spot where Tom Terror had sacrificed him to the deadly cords of his inhuman miscreants, dashed through the canyon at the top of his speed.

Unconscious and bleeding the bonanza-hunter lay, corpse-like, on the strong neck underneath which his rough hands were tightly clasped.

Out into the soft moonlight beyond the mouth of the gulch, went the animal with undiminished speed down the road to Custer until, having galloped through the woe-begone suburbs of the mining town, he was checked by several iron bands before the hotel.

Flecked with foam, wild-eyed and panting heavily, the steed elicited a thousand ejaculations of wonder and surprise. The excited men, a score of whom belonged to Maverick Joe's

Vigilantes, felt that the demons of Cutthroat had sent the horse on his awful gallop, and the marks of the cord, still visible on the driver's neck, confirmed their belief.

But what had taken Old Jack from the stage stables so soon after his arrival? Surely some important mission had called him back to the canyon.

They carried him into the bar-room and examined his wounds. They found a bullet-hole in the right breast and a furrow in his neck, as if the last pellet had actually cut the fatal string loose.

Old Jack was subjected to some rough surgery, but it had the desired effect. He opened his eyes in the midst of the rough crowd burning to question him.

"What took me to Cutthroat?" he said. "Mebbe I dropped a valuable package from the stage. Would ye b'lieve that?"

"No!" said Maverick Joe, a little man, wiry, dark-faced and with eyes full of fox-like cunning. "You don't lose freight in Cutthroat, Jack. Suthin' else took you down thar."

"Suthin' else did!" confessed Jack. "But I didn't get it."

"Who did you see?"

"Old Tom."

The crowd started.

"He's come back as big as life, an' as onery as ever."

Maverick Joe stepped back. His little eyes were burning like twin stars.

"Tom Terror has come back! Do you hear that, boys?"

The Vigilantes had heard, and as they gathered around their leader, the air seemed to become blue with oaths and threats of vengeance.

Maverick Joe walked through the crowd with a determined purpose written on his countenance. Twenty eager men were at his heels.

"Remember your oath, Vigilantes of Custer!" he cried, addressing them. "I have longed for this time. Something always told me that this devil would come back to Cutthroat. Some sort of gravitation was bound to bring him back. Go and saddle immediately. This time he sha'n't ride away with the noose over his head."

The men separated, each to saddle his horse. Maverick Joe re-entered the hotel; but the place where Old Jack had lain was vacant.

"Tifey took him down to his horses," explained a man. "He's got a bed there, and you know the stable is as good as many a house in Custer. He got delirious after you went out, and raved about a bonanza bigger than the Emma King. It must have had something to do with his trip to Cutthroat, for he mixed Tom Terror and the big bonanza together all the time."

The captain of the Vigilantes went out, and bent his steps toward Old Jack's stable.

This was a substantial structure which served to shelter the stage-horses and their rough master. Maverick Joe paused at the door and listened; but, not hearing any noise, he went in.

A lantern that hung on a nail afforded the light that revealed the interior. It showed the Vigilante the roughest kind of low cot, sitting bolt upright in which was the old driver. Maverick Joe stopped at the sight.

Jack's eyes were bloody, fierce and wolfish; they rolled restlessly in their cavernous sockets, and told the Vigilante that the old man was at that moment wrestling with death.

"I'll strike it yet! Afore Old Jack pushes in his last chips, he'll get his hands on two things—Tom's throat and the big bonanza! Jack Drivewell the stage-driver ar' dead! but outen his ashes phenix-like bes risen Old Jack the throat-hunter, and bonanza king!"

Maverick Joe stood petrified on the spot where he had stopped on catching sight of the old man.

It was a scene that sent a cold chill along the Vigilante's bones, and his horror was increased when he saw Jack spring from the cot, and with a terrible display of wolfishness tear the surgeon's bandages from his throat.

"They put them rags on Jack the stage-driver! I'm the bonanza king! I don't wear rags. Tom, old pard, I'm comin' arter yer throat. The big bonanza ar' all mine!"

Maverick Joe saw the madman snatch his coat from the nail on which the surgeon had placed it. He staggered as he put it on, but he succeeded. Then he began to buckle on his pistol-belt.

"The lunatic thinks he is well," exclaimed the Vigilante at last. "He doesn't feel his wounds. It is the death-spasm that controls him."

Jack was moving toward the horses with the

evident intention of saddling one, when Maverick Joe started forward.

All at once Jack caught sight of him, and with an oath his hand flew to a revolver; but Joe's fingers encircled the frenzied arm.

"Go to bed!" Maverick Joe said as he almost shrank from the eyes that danced in the old driver's head. "We're going down thar to avenge you. We'll find that particular throat, Jack, and you shall have the bonanza at last."

"Do the throat-huntin' an' the bonanza business fur Old Jack?—you an' yer chaps, Maverick?" roared the madman. "Kin I trust you?"

"I think so."

"Trust twenty Custer boys with a bonanza that skunks the Emma King? and trust 'em to bring Tom Terror's throat unmarked to Old Jack? I'd sooner trust a Digger Injun! I'm goin' to do my own huntin'."

He broke from Maverick Joe's grasp.

"Ar' ye goin' down?"

"Yes."

"So am I."

He tottered as he turned away, but the Vigilante started after him.

"Jack—Jack—"

"You don't want me along!—that's it! The bonanza is to be divided, eh?" the wild man had stopped and turned upon Maverick Joe; but the next moment he leaped forward, and the two men clutching staggered through an avenue beside the stall and rolled among the horses' feet!

It was a struggle for life in the dark, for the partition of heavy boards that rose between them and Jack's sleeping-room shut off all light from the lantern.

For several moments the two men writhed and struggled there, then the door opened and Maverick Joe came out.

"I had to do it!" he groaned. "May Heaven have mercy on his soul and mine! But no body heard the rumpus. Never mind, Jack; I'll find the throat you wanted, and, with that big bonanza, if it was not merely a creation of a crazy head, I'll build you a monument that'll make yer speerit proud."

The Vigilantes' captain did not tarry.

If he had looked into the little room of the stable-home, still dimly lighted by the dusty lantern, he would have seen an inanimate form stretched upon the rumpled cot.

"Hyar's the cap'n!" cried a score of voices, and Maverick Joe, roused by the sounds, found himself in the midst of his Vigilantes.

The men had been waiting for their leader, and in less than five minutes, he placed himself at their head mounted on his trusted horse Bonanza.

"I'm afraid Old Jack's dead," said the Vigilante captain. "Boys, we've got to avenge him. Many's the letter he's brought to us from the States—letters from the friends we've got thar. Tom Terror is back; he gave Jack his last dose. Think of this, boys."

He got the desired response, oaths of vengeance and looks of intense hatred.

The band that galloped toward Cutthroat knew every pebble that lay in the road. The Vigilantes went cautiously into the gulch, they glided among its shadows, they waited for their prey at different places with their fingers on the trigger, and with the fatal noose ready for the neck which they had encircled once before.

"Nothing hyar!" said Maverick Joe, disappointedly, after an hour's waiting at a certain point. "The game has slipped us for to-night. We must come ag'in. Lilly, Antenat and Moravy, you will remain in Cutthroat. We will go back and bury Old Jack. That's as much our duty, as finding the neck we once roped."

It was with reluctance that the Vigilantes fell in line behind their leader. They must, perforce, give up the hunt for that night.

"Won't we give Jack a grand plantin'?"

Maverick Joe looked at the handsome young Vigilante who rode at his side.

"Ay, we'll plant him well, Harry. I wish we could please 'im by burying Tom's throat, and the big bonanza in the same grave."

"That bonanza business must have been imagination," answered the young man.

"May be so," said Joe, half-musingly. "But I've been thinking since I left Jack. Did you ever hear of that rumor?"

"About the girl, cap'n?"

"Yes. People don't talk about it much now. Jack used to talk about it. I recollect one night that he sat up till three—it was in his stable—talking about the woman that he eloped with away down among the States. Old Jack used to

be a good-looking young man, and not very long ago either."

"Oh, I never heard about the elopement," exclaimed the young Vigilante quickly. "What has that to do with the lost girl?"

"A good deal if Jack told the truth. You see, Harry, Jack's wife was rich—her father had lots of the lumps—but she took up with Jack. Of course they had to run away, and the old man cut the girl off and curse her besides. They had one child—a girl. She was born somewhere in Sacramento Valley. Jack and his wife showed that they could be as contrary as the old man. One day, five years after the elopement, a letter came from Jennie's father; but she spunked up and chuck'd it into the fire without opening it. What war in it nobody knows. It war the last one thet come. Jack said thet night in his stable thet he would give his right arm—and it war his business arm, too, to know what thet letter said. But the fire had cindered it. To make a long story short, Harry, Jennie died a year after thet, and Jack loaned his baby girl to an old pard, who went under the time the Feather river Injuns got on their ears and killed everybody."

"But the girl—Jack's baby?"

"That's the mystery. Sometimes Jack used to say that his little Jennie war dead, and then he would think that, after all, he would see her ag'in. He would say thet a big pile of money was coming to her. And now he is dead. Harry, what is your opinion of that big bonanza which filled his mind at the last moments? Mightn't it mean more than imagination?"

The young Vigilante admitted that Maverick Joe might be right.

"I really wish he warn't dead," and the captain spoke with a deep sigh.

"May be he isn't," said Harry, a ray of hope lighting up his eyes.

"I guess all ar' gone—Jack, little Jennie, the big bonanza—all! And no man in Colorado hates it more than Maverick Joe."

The man looked up as he spoke; they were nearly out of the gulch; a few rods further on and the gray streaks of dawn would burst upon them from the far-away horizon, cloudless and gray.

But, all at once, in tones that startled both horse and rider, rung out a single word:

"Halt!"

Reins and revolvers were instantly drawn.

"Form into single rank, an' come on!" continued the same voice, which came from between two outstretched pistols. "I intend to hunt the big bonanza myself, and the throat of Tiger Tom is my property; it is not to be let out in shares. I've staked my claim, and I'm goin' to work it alone. Form into single rank, an' ride by. The first hand that goes up, drops!"

Maverick Joe, despite his courage, almost fell against his young companion.

His followers had also recognized the specter with the pistols.

It was old Jack, the driver, but he looked more like a corpse than a man in whose breast a heart was beating.

"Single file!" said Maverick Joe, glancing at his Vigilantes. "Death is at the old fellow's heart-strings. He doesn't know what he's doin'. Let no man touch 'im."

At the head of his men, the Vigilante moved forward. Chilled with terror, they all hugged the canyon wall, nor breathed until they had passed the apparition.

Beyond the specter Maverick Joe drew rein.

"Great rocks and the gods! did you all notice 'im?" he exclaimed, turning to his men.

"He is dead! stone dead!" said several. "Look! there he sits yet! just as we passed 'im. He'll tumble off when his horse moves!"

The band looked back, and saw the occupant of the pass, motionless, like an equestrian statue in brass.

But suddenly the silence was broken.

"Now for the big bonanza! Hurrah! for the claim what hes but one big share!"

Then the ghostly horse shot forward, and the white-faced men who looked, saw him carry his death-touched rider out of sight.

CHAPTER VI.

HANGED.

To return to the boy Vigilante and his prisoner.

The words that we have recorded as they fell from the youth's lips, told Deadly Dan that the life which he had carried on a hair trigger throughout the wild West, was in imminent peril.

His arms had been pinioned at his sides, and Red Crest, the Sioux, trotted at his horse's head.

"Where is this self-styled court where you

are popularly supposed to administer justice?" sneered the captive Sport, unable to curb his feelings and impatience longer. He had turned upon the boy avenger to whose temples a flush of indignation had mounted.

"We are almost there," was the answer. "You are not expecting mercy at our hands?"

"I don't ask any!" was the mad retort.

"You were going to grant me much that night in the camp on the Rosebud when Red Crest interfered!"

Deadly Dan shot a look of anger at the Indian which was returned with interest.

"Of course not," he said, answering b's young interlocutor. "If you know what I do, boy, maybe you wouldn't blame me for wanting your life—that is, if you were in my place, and had my nature."

The eyes of Judge Lynch, Jr., dilated with astonishment; he glanced quickly at Red Crest as if fearful that the Sioux was listening. But such did not seem to be the case.

"What do you mean?" he ejaculated, without second thought, but the derisive smile that came to Dan's lips quickly told him that he had been too precipitate.

"Ha! wouldn't you like to know?" whispered Deadly Dan, leaning toward his captor. "You know that there is some secret connected with your life; you must believe that I am the possessor of it, but I can not think that you are fool—idiot enough to dream that I am going to divulge it. Do you think I will, judge?"

The boy could but notice the maliciously triumphant twinkle that, dancing in his prisoner's eyes, lent a most fiendish expression to his countenance.

"A secret about me?" he asked himself. "This is the third time I have heard such hints," and while he thought, his look told Dan how wolfishly the insatiable demon curiosity was gnawing at his heart-strings.

The sight delighted the Sport.

He did not notice that they had entered Cutthroat, so intently was he gazing into the hand-some young face revealed by the soft moonlight.

"We are here!" fell suddenly from the Indian's lips, and the boy, throwing a hasty glance around, replied:

"Indeed, we have reached our court. Rosebud, in all your travels have you ever seen such a temple of justice?"

Deadly Dan looked up. Far away stretched the whitened bed of the canyon; on either hand the somber walls rose to a dizzy height. A dark fringework, hundreds of feet overhead, told him that one of the great forests of Colorado had been divided by the gulch.

"So this's the spot which you insult by calling it a temple of justice?" he said, calmly. "If you are ready to proceed with your infamous work, Deadly Dan, the Wolf of the Rosebud, is at your service!"

These words were couched in the coolest of tones; they told the boy judge that his prisoner was a man of iron nerve.

"I never delay matters," was the answer. "I know from experience that the doomed man is as anxious to have the unpleasant business finished as the judge. Throw the rope, Red Crest."

The boy loosened a coil of rope that hung from his saddle, and tossed it at the Indian who dexterously caught it.

Stepping from the horses, Red Crest looked up. Deadly Dan's eyes mechanically did the same, and to his surprise he saw a heavy wooden beam projecting from the canyon wall. This of itself did not startle the Sport, for many a stick had been thrust into fissures and made to serve as a gallows. But that the boy possessed such a gibbet, he did not dream.

Red Crest calculated the distance to the naked beam with the skill of a practiced lassoer, and Dan watched the rope as it shot upward from his hand like some mighty serpent.

It proved to be a gallant throw, for the lasso fell over the beam, and the end that came down on the other side was caught by the Indian with an exclamation of satisfaction.

He turned upon the boy-judge with triumph in his deep dark eyes.

"Rope ready!"

"So I see, Red Crest." Then he turned upon his prisoner. "Well, sir, do you want to keep the rope waiting?"

The lips of Deadly Dan seemed to lose color as they came sternly together.

His eyes told Judge Lynch, Jr., that he was ready.

He had no need of saying:

"Go on with your hanging. You insult me when you think that Deadly Dan is going to plead for his life."

"I can be as merciless as you are stubborn," came the quick retort. "More than one rascal, red and white, have discovered this to their cost. Go on with my hanging, eh? Indeed I will! Here I propose to avenge the crimes committed on the Rosebud. You say you possess a secret concerning my life. Since I have thought, I am convinced that it is an infamous lie—one of those mean subterfuges which villains coin for sale when justice treads upon their heels. I am not a person of mystery. I am here to avenge the best blood that ever flowed from a father's veins. I shall make this old canyon as safe for travel as the fairest stream in 'Frisco. Did the Custer Vigilantes with Maverick Joe at their head start upon seeing two corpses hanging from a beam thrust like you one into the canyon wall? I had just closed an exciting session of court. Did Old Jack's stage horses scare at something that seemed to fall from the skies into Cutthroat? One of my ropes, forced against a razor rock by the wind, parted, and let one of my prisoners fall! Such, Deadly Dan, is the vengeance of Judge Lynch, Jr. I never try an innocent man! I deal only with the guilty. But Red Crest is becoming restless. I fancy that his red fingers itch to give his old enemy, the Wolf of the Rosebud, the grand *coup de grace*. Now, Deadly Dan, I pass the usual sentence. You have been already tried and convicted. That sentence I carry out myself, and may Heaven have mercy on the soul of the Sport, which never knew the meaning of the word."

Rosebud Dan had listened to the boy with the air of a hardened criminal, who values as naught the reckless life which he had carried so long in his hands.

The last words roused him. He started like a captive who forgets that he is bound.

Red Crest was standing on the ground with a noose in his hands. Eagerness seemed to be devouring the Indian.

"Are you ready, Dan?—no praying—no last words?"

"None, but to tell you, boy, that you're hanging a man who can throw at your feet the biggest bonanza that ever existed."

"Going back to the lie, eh—to the secret you have made up? Ha! I thought you would beg at the last moment!"

"Beg! who's begging?" was the flashing reply. "Dan Darrell never begged for his life. He has told the truth. As he is shortly to appear some place, beyond this planet—just where he can't say—but somewhere before a great Judge, he swears that there is a secret connected with your life!"

Judge Lynch Jr., bent forward and peered into the man's face.

Honestly was written there in characters which no eye could misjudge. The boy judge trembled; he seemed to feel that he had reached one of the most momentous periods of his life.

And he was about to hang the possessor of some important secret! The thought worried him.

"Dan, tell me. It will be the last act of your life, and one which you will not be ashamed to offer to the majestic Judge before whom you are about to appear."

If the boy had tried to suppress these words he would have failed. They forced themselves to his lips.

Deadly Dan did not move a muscle. He merely shot a rapid glance at the gallows overhead, and then permitted his eye to follow the rope to the noose in Red Crest's hand.

"For the last time, boy, I say, proceed with the execution!"

A groan of disappointment fell from the young judge's lips; but it was quickly followed by a stern command.

"Now fix the noose, Red Crest."

Almost before the last word had left his tongue, the Indian's hand executed an upward move and the noose of the strong lariat dropped over Dan's head, and was tightened with a jerk.

Then the other end of the cord was fastened to the girth of the horse which the prisoner rode, and Red Crest stepped back, his work evidently done.

It was a moment fraught with the most intense interest.

The young Jeffries looked at his prisoner, and caught his eye.

It was fearless, defiant, and bright!

For several moments the twain fought the silent eye battle, then the boy withdrew from the contest.

"Good-by, Rosebud!" he said. "If we ever meet again, it will be when I come after my rope!"

The next instant the word "Avenger!" sharp-

ly spoken fell from the youth's lips, and the captive's horse leaped forward, startled by the sudden blow of Red Crest's tomahawk handle.

Suddenly Deadly Dan was jerked from the saddle, and as the horse bounded away he shot up into space like an ascending rocket, actually hung by his own horse!

"So perish your toes and mine!" exclaimed the boy judge, glancing at the Indian whose dark skin seemed aglow with triumph. "The secret, if one Rosebud had, dies with him. What threw him into my hands, Red Crest? Fate?"

"The wolf always hunts the fawn," was the reply.

"But I have played the wolf of late. Something more than accident, as you think, brought Deadly Dan to these parts. We may never know, Red Crest."

The Indian shook his head.

"But let us go. When we reach the cave you may go back to Custer, or where you will. I will remain here and carry on court. But Maverick Joe and his men? I have not had an opportunity to question you about them."

"All in Custer when Red Crest left."

"Ah, they do not know that Tom has come back?"

"No."

"So much the better for me. I don't want those Vigilantes continually raiding my territory. By and by, when my last court is over, they shall have Cutthroat all to themselves, and welcome."

The boy was smiling, and he nodded to the Indian as he rode forward.

"Avenger is awaiting us; he knows his duty!"

Not far away the animal executioner had stopped. The rope that led from his girth to the beam above was tightly stretched, from the other end hung the body of the Wolf of the Rosebud!

One-half of his figure was in the moonlight, the rest swayed to and fro in the shadow of the beam.

Judge Lynch, Jr., sprung to the ground, and with Red Crest's help loosened the lengthy lasso which they again made fast, but this time to a large rock at the foot of the canyon wall.

Then the Indian leaped upon the horse just relieved from duty, and the two prepared to gallop away.

"A last good-by, Rosebud!" said the boy judge, looking at the ghastly figure above.

"Good-by, trailer!" said Red Crest, waving a farewell salute with his red hand. "No burning lodges on the trail that leads to the land of the Evil Spirit. Good by, bad brother!"

"Good-by, devils."

Whence came that voice? Or was it but an infernal echo from the shadows overhead?

Instinctively the twain looked into each other's faces.

Both had heard the startling words.

"Who is up yonder?" queried the white boy.

"No! no! 'tis the voice of the dead Wolf! Come, brother. Red Crest has heard the spirits that speak in the gulches of the Rosebud. They foller him here. If we ride like the storm, they cannot catch us."

And the next moment the Sioux urged his horse forward, and left his young companion to follow at his leisure.

"Somebody has witnessed the hanging," he said. "But, never mind! the deed is done, and the villain who basely attempted my life on the Rosebud, will never lift another knife, or burn another town!"

Then he rode under the suspended man, and rejoined the Indian.

The two went down the canyon together.

CHAPTER VII.

ROSEBUD DAN'S SECRET.

THERE was something attached to the peril from which Tom Terror had just escaped that sent a nameless chill to his heart. He had faced death a score of times and in as many different shapes; he had looked calmly into the muzzle of the revolver and felt the keen-edge of cold steel at the throat; he had even had the rope of the heartless Vigilantes round his neck. But never before had death come so near, unexpected and in such shape.

The rock which according to the terrified man's calculation, must have weighed a ton, had not missed him more than two inches. It had even brushed the rim of his hat; it had fanned his cheek.

A long time elapsed before the Gulch Tiger recovered; the voice from above, threatening vengeance yet to come, did not serve to quiet his fears.

"That's the girl who got the string last night. I know it!" he repeated several times. "The boy tore it off in time to save her life, though I didn't think he would. And now she's turned vengeance-hunter. I fancy that she intends to live away up there, and watch for me. It's a mean, scandalous way o' gettin' even—to stand over a feller and throw boulders down on 'im. A man wouldn't think of that; but a gal—why a gal thinks o' everything."

Let us ascend to the top of the canyon, and see the person against whom the canyon free-booter exhausted the vocabulary of railing.

The hands which had pushed the stone over the edge of the wall were small and beautiful. They belonged to a young girl who might have reached her seventeenth year. She was of medium height, rather slightly built, with a fair, fresh skin, and sparkling black eyes. At a goodly distance she might have been taken for a member of the opposite sex, for the garment that reached but a little ways below the knees was fringed after the manner of the frontier hunting-frock. Her petite feet were incased in a pair of Indian moccasins; and her leggings of pliable goods, reached to the strings of these picturesque shoes.

On the whole, the girl on the cliffs formed a romantic piece of living statuary in the moonlight that fell unobstructed about her.

If she was armed, her person bore no evidences of it. The weapon which she had just hurled at Tom Terror was one which could not be borne by such slender arms as hers.

She had not witnessed the Tiger's manner of dealing with Old Jack the stage-driver. There were many shadows between her and the exciting drama going on below, but the voices came up to her, clear and distinct, without a syllable missing, and she heard Jack's shriek and the shots of the scarlet Thugs.

These sent the hot blood in a lightning-like current through her veins. She fairly leaned over the dizzy height, and for the first time saw the outlines of the figures below. The moon was now shining in the gulch.

"The white Thug and his creatures are down there!" fell in angry and vengeful accents from her tongue. "They have added another human being to their catalogue of victims, and he Old Jack, the man who once looked at me till I felt my heart beat in my bosom like a bird beats herself against the sides of the cage. Oh, if I had a weapon here! I see the white Thug! I can't I send a death missile down among them!"

As the beautiful speaker started from the edge of the cliff with flashing eyes, her heel came in contact with a stone which moved as she was almost thrown over it.

"Ah! why cannot a boulder become a weapon of vengeance?" she suddenly exclaimed, and before the thought could be rejected she seized the rock and rolled it to the edge of the precipice. "May justice direct my missile!" she cried, resting for a moment in order to summon all her strength for the task before her. "I see him plainly now! The rock, if it strikes yon jutting mass of stone, will be projected into the air and then down, down into their very midst!"

The next instant, with a quick, eager cry of vengeance, the girl pushed the rock from her with great force, and with bated breath leaned forward to watch its descent.

It shot down the side of the gulch until it struck a mass of rock that jutted from the main wall, and then, glancing off like a bomb, it went straight down like a descending cannon ball!

The wild cries of the Thugs as they attempted to dodge the singular missile of destruction reached the listener's ears, and then came the terrible landing on the canyon road.

"Missed!" cried the girl, shrinking back with bitter disappointment written on her face. "Missed by a hair!" cried that monster of wickedness. Oh, why did my missile come so near and yet miss the villain? What hand warned him? and why should fate interpose to save a life so worthless as his?"

She looked again and saw the cavalcade ride from the spot where their leader had barely escaped with his life, but springing erect she hurried after them the words we have already recorded.

"The next time, monster, my missile will strike and kill!"

Then, leaving Tom Terror to anathematize her to his heart's content, she hurried away.

"Hal will come to the cave by and by. He will not regret the failure of my attack on the Canyon Terror, for he says that he intends to hang the villain some day."

As the girl glided through the forest that

fringed the top of the canyon, the land sloped gradually, and at last she reached a ravine through which a stream had evidently poured its waters in days unremembered even by the oldest red inhabitants of Colorado.

Dropping into this fissure the girl crept toward the canyon, and disappeared all at once in a dark opening which was almost concealed by a net-work of half-dead vines.

"If Tom Terror tracks me he will not find, thanks to this secure retreat which Hal's sharp eyes discovered," the young girl smiled. "I always feel secure here; but I wish his days of vengeance would end. No rest, he says, until he has cleared Cutthroat of its curses. Sometimes when I stand before him, and hear him talk of the oath of vengeance he has sworn to carry out, I almost wish that Tom Terror and his Thugs had murdered some one whom I loved, so that I could enter into the bloody campaign with him. But, am I not helping? Did not the sight of the monster fire my heart with the torch of revenge, and did I not at tempt the life which Hal seeks? Who have I to avenge? I am a waif who drifted on a stray wave to this place. I never felt a mother's kiss, and the strong old gold-digger whose roof sheltered me a long time, would not let me call him father."

It was in the cave proper that these musings dropped in audible tones from the girl's lips.

This apartment was lofty, commodious and not ill-furnished. A fire, evidently kindled some time prior to the girl's present visit, burned in the middle of the floor and illuminated the place.

The walls gave evidence of encompassing a boy's home. There were several rude and ghastly pictures of hanging scenes, and over each hung a dark cord to which a small leaden ball was attached. Beside such pictures as these, six long white marks were visible on the northern wall of the apartment. At the right hand was a long vacant place which seemed to have been left by the artist on purpose to fill up with marks at some future time.

"Hal has not been here!" said the girl, withdrawing her hand letterless from beneath the pillow of a cot that lay in the mellow firelight. "He went down to Custer to meet his Indian friend Red Crest, but he said he would not be absent long. He cannot remain away a great while. I am eager to relate my adventure, and yet I am almost afraid to tell him that I disobeyed him by leaving the cave."

A few moments later the beautiful young girl lay on the cot with her eyes fixed dreamily on the fire. She formed a sterling picture for an artist; but only a magic brush could have laid in the wonderful colors of the scene.

An hour must have passed away before the girl moved. Then all at once, as if roused by a sound, she left the cot and leaped to a repeating rifle which her delicate fingers cocked as she lifted it from the ground.

But a figure came in sight as she sent a glance toward the mouth of the cave, and, with a cry of pleasure, the girl sprung forward.

"You did not think the Wolf had found the cave, Myra?" fell from the new-comer's lips as he came forward, and revealed himself as the boy judge.

"I did not know who had come," smiled the girl, glancing half confused at the rifle. "I have been waiting for you, for I have—"

She hesitated, for looking into his eyes, she doubted whether he was in the proper humor to listen to the story of her adventure.

"I will talk in a moment, Myra," he said, pushing by her. "I have something startling to relate."

He had dropped the hand which he had taken, and Myra, the girl, saw him go forward and halt before the six marks on the wall.

For several moments he stood there with an uneasy expression of countenance, then, as if directed by some impulse of passion, he drew a piece of chalk from his pocket, and added another stroke to the singular collection.

Myra noticed that the last mark was longer than the others.

"A special enemy!" she said to herself. "I wonder if he met the Canyon Monster? No! no! he was surrounded by his Thugs!"

Almost abruptly the boy Vigilante turned upon the girl; the piece of chalk still in his hand.

"One more, Myra!" he exclaimed. "Do you not see that the last mark is the longest one on the wall? Ah! girl, I met an old foe to-night; but—if he had divulged a secret which I believe he held, there would be no mark there, although I hated him with all my heart."

"A secret! a secret!" cried the girl. "Whom did it concern?"

"Me!"

"You, Hal? Why I always thought I was the best subject for a secret—or some such mystery like they have in novels. What do you think the dead man's secret was?"

The boy shook his head; he was troubled.

But the fair white hand of the girl touched his arm, and her bright eyes smiled through the mist that enshrouded them.

"If there is a mystery concerning you, Hal, time will clear it up," she said. "But the man was he a Thug?"

"No. His name was Dan Darrell. Deadly Dan he was called. I have told you about how he acted on the Rosebud?"

"Oh, yes. And so you met at last? Fate brought you together!"

"Yes, it must have been fate; but I did not think so when I hanged him. He said that his secret concerned me; he said it with his last breath, Myra. I believe him. Men like Dan Darrell don't die with lies on their lips."

For several minutes the pair stood face to face, speechless but thoughtful.

"I would give my right arm if Rosebud Dan was alive," cried the boy judge, starting forward. "His stubbornness hung him, more than my hatred or my revenge. Look at the legacy he left behind—a tortured, doubting mind. Girl, girl, you cannot know how I have suffered since I left that wretch and his secret hanging together."

"Maybe, Hal—" Myra the waif hesitated.

"Go on."

"Once you hung a foe, but the neck was not broken, and he escaped. Are you certain that Deadly Dan is dead?"

The boy avenger almost shrieked as he bounded forward.

"Ah, why did I not think of it before? No, I am not certain that he is dead. Come, girl, it is not far away; there is a certain place from whence we can look down upon the gallows. The voice! Ah! I recall it now. It frightened Red Crest; it even paled my cheek, for on the spur of the moment, Myra, I thought it came from the dead man."

The hand of the young Vigilante encircled the girl's wrist, and a moment later the two were going up the waterless ravine.

They seemed to hold their breath as they went on, the boy slightly in the advance, and not a syllable escaped their lips until more than a mile of woodland along the top of the canyon had been traversed.

"Here at last!" exclaimed the young Vigilante, halting, and then approaching the edge of the precipice. "We are directly over the beam to which I hung Rosebud Dan."

With eyes full of eagerness and suspense, the boy dropped his companion's hand, and crept forward. He was almost afraid to look over the cliff. Deadly Dan might be hanging there with the secret locked in a heart as dead and cold as a stone!

Earnestly trusting otherwise, the boy lynch-er shut his lips, and was about to solve all mental questions when a stern voice rung in his ears.

"Hello thar! youngster. Do you want to go over the edge o' Cutthroat, or die whar ye ar?"

A piercing cry fell from the girl's lips as the boy started back, sprung erect, and wheeled quickly.

"I've got ye whar I've long wanted to see ye—at the end of my rifle. Look at the stars, look at the gal, an' say yer pray'rs, for my fingers's on the trigger an' I'm goin' to send the bullet home!"

There was no mercy in the voice, no hope in the expression of the face that confronted the boy.

He stood before, and in the power of, Tom Terror, the Gulch Tiger.

CHAPTER VIII.

TOM TERROR AND THE LYNCHER.

THE boy judge was in a situation of imminent peril; not only this, but Myra, the waif, also stood before the deadly repeater which the Canyon Terror kept against his shoulder.

"He says he has long wanted to catch me napping," said Hal, to himself. "Is it for the Thugs I have strung up, or does he possess the secret that Rosebud Dan refused to divulge? I need not expect mercy at his hand; but Myra! What will the villain do with her?"

"Ar' ye ready?" came the question that broke roughly in upon the boy's thoughts. "My rifle's gettin' uncommon heavy, an' besides it's gettin' light in the east."

The young lynch-er instinctively looked toward the orient, and detected a belt of gray along the far-off horizon.

It was probably the last morn he would ever see!

When he turned to the wretch who, mounted on a strong-limbed iron-gray horse, seemed to have moved nearer, he felt a hand steal into his, and the white face of the beautiful waif was upturned to his startled gaze.

"Hal," she whispered, "the men of Custer—the Vigilantes are below. I heard the voice of Maverick Joe their leader. Can we expect help from that quarter?"

"No! I do not think they would save me if they could. I've pre-empted their claim, as it were. They posted a notice in the canyon three months ago that they would lynch me just as if I were one of that devil's Thugs."

"There! there! don't you hear their horses?" said the girl. "Tom Terror hears them, too."

"But he evidently thinks them his infamous bands, Myra—"

The boy's sentence was broken by a startling voice which did not fall from the Tiger's tongue.

On the contrary, it came up from below, and was followed by the furious galloping of a single horse.

"Now for the big bonanza! Hurrah for the claim that hes but one big share!"

Tom Terror starting violently, lifted his head, and listened to the tread of the unseen horse.

"That roused him!" said Myra, in a low tone. "He seems to recognize the presence of an enemy in Cutthroat. Quick, Hal, for your life! Now is our time. Cover him while he seems bewildered by the sounds below."

The boy executioner would have acted without his companion's words. Tom Terror seemed unnerved by the noise in the canyon; but he was suddenly brought back to the exciting present by the aggressive action which the boy assumed.

"Fair play!" cried Hal as he sprung forward with a drawn revolver. "Now, my good fellow, be so obliging as to fling your repeater over the wall. Quick! or there'll be a riderless horse where you now sit."

The Gulch Tiger ground his teeth with rage, and roundly cursed the accident which had diverted his attention from his foe.

He had removed his finger from the trigger; if he attempted to regain it, death might leap from the pistol and prevent.

"Throw it over!" continued the lynchster sternly. "One—two—"

Accompanied by a fierce brigandish oath, and the flashing of a pair of evil eyes, the carbine disappeared over the brink of the precipice, and the boy heard the sound of its arrival on the stony road far below.

"That's sensible! now the pistols."

"You can't deprive me of somethin' I hevn't got," growled Tom.

"Can't? One—"

Another savage oath, and two large revolvers, drawn suddenly from the Tiger's belt, followed the repeating rifle.

"Now, get down."

"I prefer to die on my horse," said the Terror of Cutthroat, affecting to accept the doom which now seemed inevitable.

"The court decides otherwise."

"The court? Oh, yes. I've got the keerd o' your somewhar on my person. But you generally hang."

"Always!"

"They'll hev a precious time hangin' me," thought Tom, as he shrugged his Atlantean shoulders and looked contemptuously at the youthful couple. "I hope they'll try; I do so, by the eyes of the gods! Then my weapons will hev company down thar."

As he finished, without any additional command he leaped from his horse, and stepping from the animal, said with a strange display of eagerness:

"Hyar I am, as ready to die as I've been any time durin' the last six months."

Myra looked into her companion's face.

"You can't hang that man!" she said. "He is a perfect giant—a modern Hercules."

The boy lynchster smiled.

"Never mind; the rope has been made for his neck," he said. "But he may not feel it there to-night."

Tom Terror had folded his arms on his brawny chest, and his head thrown proudly back and his stalwart figure erect, he presented a picture of strength and defiance.

"I'll bend that haughty frame!" said the young hanger proudly. "He's a coward at heart. Now watch him shrink, Myra."

"I tell you I'm ready!" ejaculated the Canyon King as if becoming impatient. "If the court always hangs, here's the primest subject

in Colorado. Call up the sheriff, judge, an' let the air-dance proceed."

The boy's eyes wandered to the edge of the cliff.

"I'm not prepared to hang at this moment. In fact, you have caught me without a rope, Tom Terror. But perhaps there is one handy. I'll send you after it."

"Me? Why, judge, I might forget to come back."

"I'll attend to that," answered the boy. "Go to the edge of the wall where you rock lies, and look over. If I am not mistaken, you'll see the gallows that I have used on two occasions."

"The timber in the wall, eh?"

"Yes; you've seen it?"

"Wal, I reckon we've all seen it."

"Do you think you could climb down to it tonight, cut the subject loose that hangs from it, and bring the rope up?"

For the first time Tom Terror showed signs of weakness.

"I never tried to go down a perpendicular wall, smooth as glass—"

"Oh, there are steps—niches in it," interrupted the boy. "Go and look."

A scrutinizing look into the speaker's face seemed to assure Tom Terror that no treachery was meditated, and he moved toward the edge of the precipice.

Hal, the young lynchster, followed him with a smile.

"He doesn't expect to find anybody swinging from the beam—certainly not his old acquaintance Rosebud Dan. Listen and look, girl. You'll see the old fellow shrink from the edge in a moment, and hear him utter a cry of horror."

A minute's walk sufficed to bring Old Tom to the fringe of the precipice, and a moment later, with much of his old courage, he was looking over the dizzy height.

A shade of disappointment came to the faces of the watchers. He was looking down as if his suspicions had been confirmed.

"Can you cut him loose and bring up the rope?" asked the boy hanger.

"Cut who loose, an' git what rope?"

"Why the man hanging from the beam in the wall?"

"Ye're mistaken, judge; somebody's fooled ye."

"Mistaken?—fooled?" echoed the boy, and he quickly thrust the revolver into Myra's hand saying: "You can shoot! watch that man and drop him over the cliff if he attempts to fly or attack. No man at the beam? Great heavens! what has become of Rosebud Dan?"

Springing from the girl's side, Hal bounded to the edge of the gulch wall, and reached it at a spot a few feet from where the Thug stood.

Then leaning eagerly forward, with his heart in his throat, he looked down.

One moment satisfied him.

There stretched the heavy wooden beam which he had thrust into the natural fissure at the peril of his life; the dawn revealed it in all its loneliness and nudity.

Not a single sign of his last victim rewarded his startled vision!

Rosebud Dan, rope, all had disappeared!

The boy lynchster shrunk back, for the moment unnerved. His face was colorless, and he glanced at the Gulch Giant who was trying, as it seemed, to fathom his surprise.

Hal staggered rather than walked back to the girl, who, revolver in hand, had not taken her eyes from Tom Terror one second.

"The Thug was right. Rosebud Dan and the rope are gone!" he said.

"Cut down?"

"Heaven knows. But one thing is certain: If he was not dead the secret may yet reach my ears. If the lasso slipped from its rock, Deadly Dan will never divulge the secret."

"What do you say now, judge?" came from the Canyon King derisively. "Shall I go an' hunt the rope, ye thought war on the beam?"

But the boy was in no humor for sarcasm or taunts.

He silently took the pistol from Myra's hand and looked at Tom.

"For the present you can mount your horse and go where you please," he said.

"Honest Injun, judge!"

"I can't hang you without a rope," was the answer.

"I'm kind o' sorry it warn't on the beam; hate to see you disapp'nted. If I hed a lasso—"

"Mount and go!" was the stern interruption. "We'll meet again. Even if you leave Cutthroat—"

"I'm goin' to stay! Now let me put in a few words. I come back hyar on purpose to hunt

you. I never beat around the bush, but I go right through it. I tell you, little hanger, that the rope that touches this rough neck'll never run through yer hands. You're a blasted fool for stickin' to the cord. We ar' not such fools as that. Ye've got the best chance on me that you'll ever git. Now touch the trigger, an' don't plant the seeds o' wrath above dark Cutthroat."

Once more the Tiger drew his giant frame to its full height, and struck the attitude which we have already described.

But the young Vigilante shook his head.

"There's the horse. Go!" he said.

Tom Terror sprung forward, and mounted his steed with an ejaculation of relief.

"So," he said sarcastically as he took up the reins. "You're goin' to hang me, boy?"

"I am!"

"You're a sneakin' little liar!" came over the gray steed's ears. "On the contrary I'm goin' to make a widow outen the livin' doll at yer side, then I'll leave Cutthroat, an' work a bonanza bigger nor twenty Emma Kings. You heard what that fellow said down in the canyon awhile ago? He war right; the big bonanza ar' goin' to hev but one share!"

As the man's lips quivered with the uttering of the last word, he turned his horse's head and spurred him away.

Hal, the lynchster, gazed after him like a person just emerging from a trance.

"He'll try to keep his word!" exclaimed Myra. "Oh, Harry, I do not believe in an indiscriminate vengeance, but you had that fiend in your power, and you let him escape."

"I did!—I did!" cried the boy springing forward.

"It is war to the knife now in Cutthroat."

"It has always been that; but that is not what I am thinking about."

Myra's hand touched his arm.

"Will you tell me, Harry?"

"Then you have not guessed!" he said wheeling upon her. "Tom Terror knows the secret that died with Deadly Dan—if he is really dead. My life is sought for a purpose. Oh, Heaven, what is this mystery?"

And the boy in the burning anxiety of the situation, looked appealingly to the sky which each moment was brightening overhead.

CHAPTER IX.

A TRIGGER TOUCHED.

THAN Lilly, Antenat and Moravy, the three Vigilantes detailed by Maverick Joe to remain in Cutthroat for certain purposes, a trio of braver men never crossed the rushing river of the Great West.

There was creole blood in Antenat's veins; his companions were Americans, men who had seen rough life in all its thrilling phases, good shots, strong fisted, fearless, careless, in short the best sort of the rough-and-ready characters of the frontiers.

The towering walls of the canyon, despite their seeming solidity, offered admirable hiding-places for man and beast. In many places great indentations, and even caves existed, and it was into one of the latter that the three Vigilantes went after hearing their leader's command.

This cave has been visited before, especially by Antenat, the half-creole, for on springing from his horse, he ran to a niche in the wall, and took therefrom a little package which, in the light of the fire kindled by his companions, he unwrapped with a curious smile on his dark face.

"Parbleu! it is here yet," he exclaimed, as the contents of the packet were exposed to view. "See, messieurs! what a pretty ring! where is the petite mademoiselle on whose finger it used to shine?"

Lilly and Moravy looked at the bauble, beyond all doubt a child's ring, and then turned their questioning eyes upon the exhibitor.

"Where did you get it, Antenat?" they both asked, in one breath.

"One day I was sitting on my horse, under the 'devil's wing,' when all at once something came down, from the sky, mebbe, and hit me plumb on the hand! *Sacre bleu!* how I started and looked up. I put my hand on my pistol, but there was nothing over me but the sharp, black rock and the sky, blue as my mistress's eyes. Then I looked at the ground, and there lay something that glittered. Down from the saddle went Louis Antenat, and he held in his hand this, *ma chere* comrades," and the old fellow held the little ring between thumb and fore-finger, before his companions' eyes.

"A curious find!" said Moravy. "And you hid it here?"

"Yes, mon ami."

"Why not carry it with you, Antenat? The owner—"

"Did *le infant* drop it into my hands?" interrupted the Creole, surprised. "Nay! I saw nothing when I looked up."

"Nothing? Not even a kite?"

"Sky and rock."

"Well, it's a pretty thing. Look here, Lilly; there's a little diamond set on it, and here are letters on the inner surface."

"Letters?" echoed Antenat, starting.

But Moravy bent forward into the stronger fire-light, and tried to make out the word engraved on the tiny ring.

"As near as I can make out," he said, as he looked, "the word, 'Jennie.' But this is the queerest place for a baby ring with a child's name on it. Just think of angels in Cutthroat, boys."

Lilly burst into a loud guffaw at his comrade's attempt at wit; but the lines of thought deepened on Antenat's face, and taking the ring, he looked at it steadily a long time.

"*Parbleu!* it shall not hide here any more," he said, suddenly. "When I found it I said I would put it away where nobody would find it, for there are fellows who would sell it for a drink of whisky! Antenat will carry it with him, hereafter. Ah! *ma petite* Jennie, some day old Louis may have the pleasure of restoring your ring."

The two men did not hear the last sentence, for Lilly had leaped up, and darted toward the mouth of the cave.

His figure was unseen for a moment, and then it sprang back into the firelight, and beckoned the others to his side.

"This confounded old canyon is haunted," said the Vigilante, in low tones that corresponded well with the colorless face he exhibited. "If the thing hasn't departed, I want to show you a sight that unmarred me more'n fifty pistols. Easy, boys."

Antenat and Moravy drew their weapons as they glided away at Lilly's heels, and when their guide halted among the dense shadows that lay at the mouth of the cave, and pointed forward, they held their breath and looked.

"There! a ghost with a rope around his neck!" said Lilly. "If we had finished Tom Terror that day I could call the speerit by name, but Tom got off alive, and report says that he's hyar now, and in the flesh. When I got hyar a minute ago I heerd something come staggering down the canyon, and all at once that thing came in sight, and stopped whar it's been standin' ever since."

The canyon at that point was not very wide; a gentle toss would have tak'n a pebble easily across, and the moonlight fell uninterrupted upon the uncanny object upon which the startin' eyes of the three Vigilantes were fixed.

There were scars on the bodies of the trio that told that nothing human could unnerve them; but here was the disembodied spirit of a man who had been hung, for the ghastly rope about his neck was as plainly visible as his figure!

Antenat was the first to recover.

He stood behind his comrades and their first intimation of his intention, was the revolver that crept between their faces.

"What! you are not going to shoot it?" exclaimed Lilly, as his hand seized the outstretched pistol.

"*Sacre bleu!* why not?" answered the creole, with a malicious grin. "If ghost, bullet go through and flatten on the wall. If flesh an' blood, *parbleu!* monsieur will be there after Antenat has shot."

"Let him shoot!" said Moravy.

"And bring about a tussle with the Thugs? We hevn't such orders from Maverick."

Antenat's hand dropped.

"That's so," he said. "Wait, *ma comrades*."

The creole retreated into the cave, but soon returned with a coil of rope in his hand.

"Antenat lasso monsieur le spirit," he said, as his dark little eyes twinkled.

"But he is leaning against the wall," said Lilly, quickly. "And, besides, your lariat is too short. I say let 'im go. No good can come out o' foolin' with such a thing."

But the creole did not listen, and gliding between the two Americans, he went out into the shadows of the eastern wall.

"Look! he is moving!" suddenly cried Lilly, grasping Moravy's arm. "He has seen Antenat. There! see the rope dragging at his heels."

"That's no ghost!" retorted Moravy.

"Speerits ar' some kind o' ar' that kin git over ground without noise, but that fellow rattles the pebbles; he staggers, falls ag'in' the wall,

an' then—bless my heart! his hands ar' tied! that's why he can't pick up the rope. Whar in the name of death! ar' Louis?"

The next instant the creole answered the excited Moravy, for something long, dark and serpent-like shot through the moonshine, and fell over the head of the object staggering along the wall.

The two men at the mouth of the cave darted into the canyon with exclamations of astonishment, as the creole jerked the "ghost" from his feet, and brought him heavily to the ground.

"Flesh and blood, *ma chere* comrades," cried Antenat, pointing proudly to his prize as the twain came up. "*Le diable!* but he fell heavily! lasso went between him and the wall like the red-man's knife."

Mechanically the three men bent over the strange capture.

They saw a handsome figure, and a face pale as death. The eyes were staring wildly into their faces, but they were expressionless in their gleaming. A jet-black mustache drooped over the mouth, and the hands, tightly bound at his sides, were small, white, and effeminate.

"The queerest of all our finds!" said Moravy, the first to speak. "Ah! look at this rope. It's the same kind that we found 'round the necks of the two Injuns we shot down from the boy's gallows. This is some more of his work."

"He's got to have hangin' indiscriminately!" Lilly ejaculated. "By Jove! we'll put a stop to that soon. Afore long we'll catch the jedge an' hang the hull court. But what are you goin' to do with yer ghost, Antenat?"

The creole was answering. He was stripping the ropes from the man's neck, and then his knife freed the captive arms.

"He'll tell his sory in the cave," he said, glancing at his comrades. "Here, comrades, lend a hand."

A few minutes later the man thus strangely captured was laid upon some blankets in the light of the fire which the trio had built, and Antenat was trying to bring him back to consciousness.

The little old creole would not let his companions assist his endeavors; therefore, they could do nothing but sit by and watch.

"It is possible he may succeed," Lilly took occasion to whisper at Moravy's ear. "The old fellow is famous for savin' lives. He actually brought two chaps back to life after we had strung 'em up. But their necks wern't broken, of course."

"Sartainly not. When a chap's dead, why he's dead; and all the Louis Antenats in the world can't do 'im a whit o' good."

Meanwhile the creole worked on until at last he looked at his companions in triumph.

He had succeeded!

Life had come back to the lassoed man, and in broken sentences he lay in the firelight thanking his preservers.

"Who hung you?" asked Lilly.

"I'll show you before long!" he flashed. "By the oath of the gods! I am going to live for vengeance. I will not speak that devil's name until I can point to him, high and dry on the beam to which he suspended me. There were two of them, and, side by side, the vengeance of Deadly Dan will make the sneaking coyotes swing. I came to Cutthroat for blood—blood and a neck! And I'll have both, too. They took me unawares. It shall not matter how I take them; but when Deadly Dan Darrell goes back, the moonlight will fall upon the bodies of the two lynchers."

Wild and excited, the revenger had sprung erect, and he stood before the three Vigilantes like an avenging demon, while the words shot like poisoned arrows from his lips.

He talked rapidly and madly, and gave his auditors no time to get a word in edgeways.

"There!" cried Antenat the creole as the victim of the noose paused for breath. "Let me put in a word. Don't monopolize the conversation. Who do you call yourself?"

"My name is Darrell."

"But the nick-name?"

"Deadly Dan!"

"The same as Rosebud Dan?"

"The same."

Did Antenat's little eyes flash as he glanced over his shoulder at his companions?

"I'm sorry, monsieur, but you're the pard they want in these parts," he said coolly to Dan. "It arn't often that a fellow gits hanged twice in one night. Comrades, the lasso at Napoleon's saddle—quick!"

Antenat's hand moved to his revolver as he uttered the command, but the next moment with a startling cry that resembled the hoarse

intonation of the tiger, the hanged Sport darted forward.

Lilly had started after the rope; but he stopped and turned to help his friend.

The creole's weapon had been torn from his hand in the twinkling of an eye, and the two American Vigilantes saw Rosebud Dan thrust the muzzle into his face.

"Another rope for me to-night? Never! by the fires of Tophet! So you, too, would lang the Wolf of the Rosebud? There, Louis Antenat, take that with my compliments!"

The pistol touched the creole's forehead as the last word fell madly from Darrell's lips, and the next moment a dull but horrible report filled the cavern!

Lilly and Moravy started back with cries of horror, and the lifeless body of poor Antenat, released by the Spur's left hand, fell quivering to the ground.

"Now lift a finger, my friends, and I'll repeat the compliment!" thundered Deadly Dan, as turning quickly, but coolly upon the Vigilantes, he covered them with the weapon sprinkled with the creole's blood. "One hanging is my share! I've had that, but it was not enjoyed. I do not intend to furnish any more necks for such entertainments. Keep clear of me! Stand back! I'm still the Wolf of the Rosebud, and there's death in my right hand!"

He moved slowly back as he spoke, until reaching the shadow of a rock at the mouth of the cave, he sprung away with a victorious cry and was gone!

CHAPTER X.

A SHOT FOR THE BIG BONANZA.

"If Tom Terror wasn't under the protection of some unaccountable fate, your missile would have put an end to his life."

"I begin to believe it now," answered the beautiful waif, to whom the boy lynch-er addressed the words we have just penned.

The pair were going back to the cave in the ravine, after their encounter with the Gulch Tiger, and Myra had related her adventure with the white Thug.

"I am rejoiced to know that your bold stroke of revenge did not succeed," continued the boy. "His words sent my blood coursing like a lava current through my veins. That man came back to Cutthroat for the expressed purpose of hunting me, whereas I did not begin my work until after the Vigilantes of Custer ran him away with a rope about his neck. Deadly Dan, after attempting my life on the Rosebud, now seeks me here. There must be a connection between these two men. I can think of nothing else."

The boy judge relapsed into moody silence, and walked, without a word, at Myra's side.

The journey back to the cave was not a long one, and they entered it as the first rays of the sun, flashing over the cliffs of Cutthroat, chased the shadows of night away.

They found the fire still burning on the well-baked floor, and the youth, leaving the girl's side, sprung forward and halted before the seven marks on the wall.

For a moment he stood there in an attitude of indecision; then he raised his hand, and with one stroke obliterated the longest mark—the one made for Deadly Dan.

"The others remain," he said, as he turned upon the girl. "But you see I am not satisfied about the Wolf of the Rosebud!"

"Although hanged, he is not dead. That is what you think?"

"That is what something indefinable tells me."

"And do you think you will wrest the secret from him?"

"I will! I will!"

"Why not from Tom Terror?"

"First, because I think him but somebody's tool; therefore, he cannot know all about it. The person who hired the canyon spider to weave a deadly web about me would hardly instruct him with all the whys and wherefores. This Deadly Dan Darrell is not the person one would judge him upon casual acquaintance. I saw much of him while we were on the Rosebud, and more than once caught him 'off guard,' as they say. Beneath his devil-may-care manners he carries some refinement, and I am satisfied that he came from the eastern cities for some specific purpose. But unwittingly, I am ready to assert, he became a desperado. We met accidentally, and when he saw me for the first time I was amazed and puzzled at the expression that filled his eyes. From that time he seemed to delight in being near me; but, though handsome and otherwise attractive, a dislike for Deadly Dan sprung up

in my heart. I did not know then that he was dogging my footsteps; but Red Crest did. Therefore, when thinking me alone he made that infamous attempt on my life, he found himself suddenly confronted by my red-faced friend, and baffled. It was at my request that Red Crest spared his life; but we have put him on trial in the camp, which was quite near an Indian village. The red people never liked him, but he had made some friends among our people, and he was banished from the camp; they tied him to a wild horse, to whose flowing tail they fastened a firebrand, and thus got rid of him."

"Did he never return?" asked the girl, who had listened to every word of the boy's narration.

"Ay, but we had departed. He came back with vengeance in his heart. When he left the second time there was no Indian village there. And it was in the dead of winter, too."

"The monster!" cried Myra. "And from that time until to-night you had not seen him?"

"Not even heard of him. But he is on the same trail that attracted him then, and, strange to say, the first person whom he encountered in Custer was his old enemy, Red Crest."

"A meeting certainly unpleasant."

"Not in the least agreeable, at least to Deadly Dan," answered the boy, with a smile. "But I will take a bite of breakfast, and then leave you for a season."

A few moments later the strange pair seated themselves before the meal, which the fair waif spread on the cavern floor, and after it had been discussed the boy took Myra's hands, and looking into her eyes, said:

"You will not turn vengeance-hunter during my absence. This little retreat is the place for you. I want you to hear the solution of this mystery."

"And I am burning to hear it, Hal," was the quick reply. "Whither are you going now?"

"To find Red Crest. I want the Indian near me henceforward."

There was a long look of something more than friendship in the couple's eyes before they separated, and Myra's followed the figure that went away.

As the boy judge emerged from the well-known cave home, he looked up at the heavens.

Overhead the limitless skies wore their garments of blue; but there were shadows in the narrow ravine.

Even at noon they lingered there, and as the orb of day declined they grew longer until once more the little chasm became cold and dark.

An ominous silence reigned over the roughness of nature that surrounded the boy lynch, and when he stepped entirely from the mouth of the cave, it was to glide down the ravine toward the large canyon.

Noiselessly he went on until, with his lithe body half hidden by a rock, he leaned forward and beheld the narrow floor of Cutthroat, two hundred feet below.

The gap looked like a dark and dangerous place, and the boy thought of the many atrocities committed there as his eyes wandered up and down the lonesome road. It was early morning, and a bird perched on a spur of the canyon wall, was filling the gloomy place with melodious matins.

But all at once the carol of the feathered songster grew still, and the well-known tread of horses fell upon the boy lynch's ears.

"Maybe they'll entertain me with a drama!" murmured Hal with a smile, as, stretching his neck forward, he evinced great eagerness to catch sight of the cavaliers.

They did not keep the boy waiting, for hard upon his words two horsemen came in sight—two men whose figures made the little lynch draw back and hold his breath for a minute.

"They were certain to get together," he said as he returned to his look-out. "They are magnets which attract each other; evil gravitates to evil, and it is but natural that Deadly Dan and Tom Terror should come together."

Deadly Dan and Tom Terror?

Yes!

The boy did not exhibit great surprise upon seeing before him the man whom a few hours before he had hung upon a gibbet higher than than Haman's famous death beam. He had come to the conclusion that by some miraculous circumstance, Rosebud Dan had escaped death, and that they were destined to meet again, and contend for the mastery, he as firmly believed.

But he did not know while he looked down upon the precious pair that the pistol conspicuously displayed in Rosebud's belt, was dyed with the blood of the creole Antenat.

"The finest pair in Colorado!" said the youth,

sarcastically, as the twain came on. "Both have worn bempen collars, but somehow or other his Satanic majesty has favored them. They're not wanted just yet in Tophet. But," his eyes flashed madly, and his hand unslung the carbine that crossed his back; "but they're going there soon whether they are wanted or not. Colorado, the youngest and fairest of the sisterhood of States, must not be cursed by the existence of such devils within her borders. She shall not!"

Wholly unaware of the keen eyes that regarded them from the mouth of the ravine, the border worthies came on and to the boy's surprise drew rein almost directly beneath him.

At the same time the rapid gallop of steeds came from the west.

"The scarlet Thugs! They are going to give me the drama!" said Hal as he waited.

Sure enough, he soon counted six horses that came toward Tom Terror and his friend, and the scarlet Thugs of Cutthroat, well made but ferocious looking Indians, sat before him like statues carved from blocks of granite.

"These are the boys with the strings," said Tom, waving his dark hand at his band as he turned to Deadly Dan. "I never saw 'em miss a throw in all my life. They call 'em Thugs down at Deadwood and Custer, an' it's the handle that suits 'em. Do you want to see 'em try their hand?"

"On my throat, Tom?" smiled Dan.

"Bless you, no, pard. Thet neck o' yours has hed its share o' ropes; so has mine; an' ef the boy keeps his word we'll get somebody else's share before we go under."

The face of Rosebud Dan grew dark as if the shadow of a cloud had passed over it.

"Never! by the eternal gods, never!" came up to the spy at the mouth of the ravine.

"But the boy says different," said Tom with a smile. "We'll see some day."

"Yes, we'll see!" hissed Dan.

"That we will, my turtle doves," murmured the watcher above.

"So you don't want to see my boys throw their strings?" queried Tom as the cloud began to leave Rosebud's face.

"On what?"

"On an arm that never strikes twice!" was the proud reply.

The next moment Tom Terror straightened in his saddle, and held up his right arm.

"Go back an' do your best throwin'," he said to his Indians.

The red Thugs exchanged glances and moved back until their leader's voice bade them halt. As they did so they loosened the death cords that hung at their belts, and rose simultaneously in their strong stirrups.

Then at a short Indian command from one of their number, the leaden balls circled about their tufted heads until, as if impelled by a single arm, they went forward hissing and writhing like half a dozen flying serpents!

Deadly Dan's quick eye followed the fatal strings, and the next second he saw them wrap themselves about Tom's sturdy arm!

"Just imagine my arm a neck!" smiled the vagabond of the gulch, turning to Dan. "My hand is almost blood-red; the strings seem to cut the bone. Not for fifty big bonanzas would I hev one 'round my neck."

Deadly Dan shuddered, and the Indians came forward with pride in their eyes; they were proud of their exploit.

"By Jove! I'd like to acquire to art," he said.

"I kin larn you. I taught my boys. Thar used to be twelve on 'em."

"The other six?"

"Attended Judge Lynch, Jr.'s court," said Tom.

"That boy again!"

"Always on top, eh?" laughed the Gulch Tiger, grimly.

"But I'll be there presently!" was the mad rejoinder.

"Here's another!"

The next moment Deadly Dan put out his hand which Tom Terror took, and the boy looked down and saw the lightnin' flash of revenge that passed between his foes.

But before that grasp was broken there came a stunning report which drove the boy back from his rock, and he heard a wild cry as Tom Terror springing erect in his stirrups, pitched forward and completely over his horse's head!

Then, quick as a flash of powder, he turned toward the spot from whence the startling shot had come.

It was directly across the canyon, for the white smoke curling upward marked the precise spot.

"Ah! you have cheated me out of a neck!" flashed Judge Lynch, Jr., catching sight of the figure on the bank. "By Jove! you shall not boast of that in Custer. Hold! my hearty; one moment and I'll pay you back!"

The carbine was at the boy lynch's shoulder, and his finger at the trigger when he saw the marksman leap to the edge of the precipice, and halt in full view of the thunderstruck band below.

"Hurrah! for the big bonanza!" he yelled, as he swung his shabby hat defiantly at the Thugs. "Now thar's but one share to it, an' that belongs to Old Jack. Go on my red neck-hunters; but recollect that the big bonanza is mine, an' I'll chaw up the man what stikes a claim on it. What ar' ye lookin' at? I'm no comet—I'm only Bonanza Jack, soon to be the gold bug of the coast."

Then, with a wild half-maniacal laugh of triumph, the man turned away, and, as he did so, the repeating rifle dropped from the young lynch's shoulder.

"I can't kill you!" he said, gazing after Old Jack. "Myra says you are mysteriously linked to her! Go and enjoy your big bonanza. But I hate you because you cheated me out of a neck!"

The ex-stage-driver soon disappeared, and Hal when he looked down into the canyon once more, saw the Thugs and Deadly Dan staring at the wound ghastly and terrible in the Tiger's breast.

"Men don't often recover from such a wound," murmured the boy. "But he's got the constitution of an ox, and that's in his favor!"

CHAPTER XI.

A WIFE FOR A GOLD BUG.

"THE man what says that Tom Terror ar' goin' to pass in his checks lies like sin! His time will not come till he has paid the rascal Jack fur this gapin' hole in his life chest. Don't look long-faced an' down-hearted, pard. I'm goin' to help you to the big bonanza. Did you ever see such an ugly hole? Why, it's big enough fur death to drive a four-in-hand into a chap's heart."

Thus spoke Tom Terror, as, with clenched teeth, he sat up, and looked at the terrible wound which Old Jack's descending ball had made. His eyes occasionally rolled like a madman's, and Deadly Dan and the Indians exchanged significant looks, but did not speak.

It was evident that all thought the gulch villain near his end.

"It won't be long afore I kin hold up my arm fur yer strings, my red boys," he said, his eyes wandering to the six scarlet faces that looked down upon him. "Did you let that winger go?"

The Indians started back.

They had neglected to pursue the man who had stricken their leader. The shot, his fall, had unnerfed them.

"No! let 'im go," continued Tom, seeing their gaze turned upon the cliffs overhead. "We'll get 'im by an' by, an' then—" he shut his lips, and clenched his white and almost bloodless hands.

"But you told me that he was wounded—killed, you once thought," said Rosebud Dan.

"So I did. The toys gave 'im the string an' Lodgepole shot 'im. But dead men don't shoot this way, eh, pard?"

Deadly Dan turned away.

"You can't stay here," he said, turning again to Tom.

"That's so. Help me up on Satan, boys.

Twelve red hands lifted the Canyon Spider tenderly from the ground, and set him upon his favorite horse.

"They'll hunt for me, he said. "I fancy that the old cave won't do. The boy knows that. The black hole can't be thought of, fur Maverick Joe an' his men hev been thar; that's whar they caught me nappin'. Ah! I know the place fur me to rest in. I found it last summer. Lodgepole, you have not forgotten—the cave in the old ravine."

The young Indian nodded and raised his eyes.

"Ravine up there."

Tom Terror looked up.

"By my blood!" he exclaimed. "It is the old place. Thar's whar we looked into the canyon, and saw Jack drive the stage by. It ar' the restin'-place I want. Lodgepole, take me thar."

A few moments later the band moved slowly from the spot where the Tiger received his wound. The progress made was painfully slow, for the fact that Tom Terror lay heavily upon the scarlet arms that supported him on either side, with his dark eyes hid and teeth

glued together, told that he was suffering the agonies of twenty deaths.

But guided by the young Thug, the speechless cavalcade finally left the bed of Cutthroat, and ascended to the ground above.

Lodgepole had not forgotten the discovery which, with his leader, he had previously made. The little ravine was reached, and found impracticable for horses, and the band dismounted. Then Tom was lifted from his animal and carried down the cut, which the piercing eyes of Lodgepole were ever scrutinizing.

At last a light cry from the Indian's lips announced a discovery, and the young Thug springing aside lifted a mass of creepers, and displayed the mouth of a cave to the gaze of all.

The wounded Thug bestowed a look of gratitude upon Lodgepole, and eagerly desired to be carried in.

A stalwart Indian caught the vines and held them up for the admission of the band.

"Rest—then the boy an' vengeance, pard," smiled Tom, letting his eyes wander to Deadly Dan. "My boots ar' on, ye see; but I'm worth a mine o' dead men. Old Jack shot at my heart, but I hain't got any; never had one, ha! ha! Easy, boys, easy! Now in we go."

He passed the natural portals of the retreat as he spoke, and in the faint light that streamed under the uplifted vines the Indians stopped to renew their hold on their leader.

At that time not a soul of that band dreamed that not twenty rods ahead a fair young girl, suddenly roused from sleep, was listening white faced and with throbless heart to the noise of their coming.

"In the name of mercy what wolves have tracked us down?" fell from her lips. "It is merciless fate that sent Harry off and left me to face them alone. But ah! he is safe. Heaven, I thank thee for that. Ay, I am glad that I am alone."

Myra, the waif, shrunk instinctively to the northern wall where the marks of the boy lynch-er's vengeance were.

The fire had died away, but arrows of light, shot by the bowmen of the sun, were penetrating the cavern. She believed that the net-work of vines had been demolished.

As the girl stood there, and listened to the sounds made by the new arrivals, she did not allow her hands to tremble at the weapon which they encircled.

It was a pretty repeating rifle almost small enough for a child's toy, but for all that it looked deadly, especially when held ready beneath the flashing, defiant eyes of the waif.

It was with bated breath, yet eager, that Myra waited for the invaders. The voices which had saluted her years were incoherent; but she heard enough to know that several Indians were not far off.

All at once the light grew dim, and Myra's quick eyes detected several grotesque heads set on pairs of Atlantean shoulders. For she stood directly before the opening, and the bodies formed dark silhouettes on the far-away background of morning's light.

"Ahn't we thar yet? This bullet in my trunk he's got to movin' about."

Myra, the waif, started.

That voice had a familiar sound. Six hours had not passed since she heard it behind the stock of a leveled carbine!

But what had happened? A bullet in Tom Terror's body? Then the Tiger had enemies besides the young judge.

"We must be in the cave," said another voice that seemed to come from a white man's lips. "But there are too many shadows here."

"A light, boys. Make a fire, an' while ye're at work put me down."

If it were possible, Myra shrunk closer to the hard wall of the cavern. She knew that discovery was but a question of time, but she did not wish to be captured in the dark by the Indians.

There was a surprise which she contemplated.

The light, first a spark, then a blaze, would soon burst upon her eyes, then—why, then she would play her part.

The kindling of the fire was not long delayed, the dry splinters of wood scraped together by the Thugs soon blazed up, and for the first time Myra saw her visitors.

She saw, too, the strong man on the floor, and in all her life the girl had never seen such a pair of wolfish eyes.

"Why, this place is inhabited!" suddenly cried Deadly Dan. "There's a cot, a stool, and clothes hanging on the wall. By my life, Tom, I believe we've invaded the boy's den."

The Gulch Tiger leaped forward like the serpent.

"What's that, pard? the boy's den did you say? Whar? Why last summer Lodgepole an' I slept hyar. We driv nails into the walls an' hung some skins on 'em; mebbe we forgot a few pelts an'—"

"But the bed!"

"Whar?—that's what I want just now. Whar's a nest?"

"In you corner."

Tom Terror uttered a cry of joy, and essayed to crawl forward.

But at that moment a voice rung through the cavern and startled every one.

"Stay where you are, or I'll let fire-light into your skulls. The limbs of a murderer shall never pollute the cot where I sleep!"

In an instant of time, as it were, the fair occupant of the cavern had become known to the Thugs of Cutthroat.

The fire leaping ceilingward revealed her graceful figure, her determined white face, and the deadly weapon in her hands.

Deadly Dan Darrell, with a cry of amazement on his lips, started from the sight, while Tom Terror having suddenly relinquished his attempted crawl to the bed, gazed at her in silence.

But a train of thought shot through his mind.

"The gal that missed me by a hair, an' this time she's got the drop on me. A bullet in yer life chest an' another about to come! Tom Terror, yer gittin' to be a rascally unlucky."

It was a strange tableau which the girl had created.

She showed no signs of life, save in the sparkling of her beautiful eyes which drew much of Rosebud Dan's attention.

"By Jove, she's a beauty!" he ejaculated. "What a queen she'd make for me when I get my fingers on the pile. The boy and she are carrying on business together; but I'm going to break up that partnership. Then she'll be free. She'd shine like a star where I could take her. Cleopatra never had such eyes; and the figure is Medicean. Do your best, Deadly Dan. You have met your fate."

Thus communed Rosebud Dan with himself as he drank in with beating heart the grace and beauty of the waif, but he was called from such contemplation by Tom Terror's harsh voice.

"What do you want?" queried the ruffian. "What ar' yer tarms?"

"We did not expect to disturb any one in this place," said the Wolf of the Rosebud, starting forward, before Myra could reply. "We merely sought an asylum for a wounded comrade."

"I'll make tarms, pard," said Tom, flashing the glare of his wolfish eyes upon the speaker. "Jest keep yer word-trap shut fur five minutes."

Dan did not continue.

"Go on," he said in an undertone. "Go on and get a bullet in your head."

By this time the Gulch Tiger had lifted himself by a mighty effort upon his feet. There he was supported by two Indians, and in this condition led forward until the girl told them to advance no nearer.

"You speak of terms," she said. "These are mine: Stand aside and let me pass."

"They're easy," was the answer. "We don't make war on women, an' I guess you'll never set the world afire if we do let you go."

Myra's heart leaped into her throat.

They were going to let her go, and beyond the cave she would join the young lynch-er, and tell him where his foes were!

But she could not avoid the handsome, eager eyes of Deadly Dan. She had seen him for the first time; but something proclaimed his identity.

This was the man whom Harry had hanged. She felt that he could be none other.

"So you accede to my terms?" she said. "I am to pass out?"

"Yes, my beauty."

Dan bit his lips and sent a look of anger at his comrade.

"Stand aside, boys," said the Tiger, to his men. "We don't want the gal. She's made tarms with the rifle, but they've got to be kept all the same."

This was spoken in a loud tone, but to one of the Thugs at his side the speaker said quickly:

"Give 'er the string, Wildcat. She's the demoness that tossed the rock last night."

At Tom Terror's command, the Indians drew sullenly back, and Myra with a light cry of triumph sprang toward the opening. As she reached Deadly Dan she heard him say:

"Go straight to Custer, girl. I'll kill the man that touches you."

Myra started at such words in such a place;

but did not pause. She was eager to get beyond the flashing eyes that regarded her, beyond the strings of the Thugs.

But alas! for such hopes and expectations.

All at once something was seen to whirl around an Indian's head, and Deadly Dan with a mad oath sprang forward to prevent the fatal throw.

But in vain!

Caught by the swift messenger of death, Myra stopped, and reeled, at the same time dropping the rifle.

The Canyon Spider uttered a cry of delight.

"Ha! ha! ha! strung, my beauty. That's the kind o' tarms I give the she wolves, pard."

But Deadly Dan did not hear his comrade, for he had leaped forward, and prevented Myra from falling to the earth.

The Indians, too, had sprung toward her.

"Back! you infernal stranglers," thundered the Wolf, as he turned upon them, a heavy revolver cocked in his right hand. "Stand where you are with your hands on your cords, but draw one if you dare. This creature doesn't deserve your strings. From this moment she is mine. Deadly Dan is her protector, and he's going to make her the wife of the biggest gold bug in the States!"

The Thugs of Cutthroat, almost consumed with rage, were cowed by Deadly Dan and his revolver.

"Make 'er what you please, pard," said Tom Terror, breaking the silence. "Thar mustn't be any hard lines betwixt us. The big bonanza ain't found yet, an' she ain't the gold bug's wife. I call my red wolves off. Now, bring the gal up to the fire."

The Indians obeyed their leader, but looked daggers at the man who had cowed them.

"You will pardon me, Tom," Dan said, coming forward. "This is a prize a fellow doesn't draw every day. Permit me to present to you the future wife of Rosebud Dan, the future money king of the States."

Tom Terror grimmed as, despite his wound, he bent down to gaze into the finely-chiseled face that Dan had lowered into the mellow firelight.

"Perty as a picter!" he ejaculated. "But what's that on her right temple, Dan? Didn't you say that a little mole shaped like a bean?"

A startling cry pealed from Darrell's throat; he thrust his face between Tom and the girl; and the next moment, with the wildest of looks in his eyes, he sprung up as Myra fell from his arms.

"Thunder and guns!" fell from his lips, as he gazed first at Tom and then at the unconscious waif. "Is it possible that I've been tracking the wrong person the best years of my life? Tom, you stare but don't speak. Can't you say a word, and confirm—no! dispel my terrible suspicions?"

Tom Terror shook his head.

"So," he said, looking up into Rosebud Dan's startled countenance, "so the baby was a girl?"

Then, as if determined to have the rest and attention that his wound demanded, despite the new and exciting phase the adventure was assuming, he staggered toward the cot.

"I reckon she'll hardly get to be the gold bug's wife now," he muttered, as he fell upon the skins and fixed his eyes on the Wolf. "He'd give an arm of that mole warn't on her face. We used to think that it war on somebody else's."

The next moment he turned away, and shutting his teeth hard, tried to kill the groan of agony that came up from his shattered breast.

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN HARRY.

AGAIN we must convey the reader to the wild metropolis of the Black Hills.

In the bar-room which we have once visited the Vigilantes of Custer were again congregated.

But they were not scattered over the smoke-begrimed premises, drinking or discussing in groups as usual the affairs of Cutthroat. On the contrary, the entire band were gathered about a dark-faced, hard-featured man, whose breadth of chest and massive arms might well have put the stamp of "athlete" upon him.

This individual was Moravy, one of the trio left in the canyon by Maverick Joe, and the Vigilantes were drinking in, as it were, the words that fell from his tongue.

The guard's appearance in the room told that something important had transpired in Cutthroat. Perhaps he had seen and tracked Tom Terror to his den.

But no! Moravy had a story to tell which sent the chill of horror to the hearts of the iron

hangmen who surrounded him, and in rough but eloquent language he told the story of Rosebud Dan's singular capture and the death of the creole Antenat.

At the mention of the Wolf's cognomen an attentive listener on the outer rim of the spell-bound circle started as if struck in the side by a dirk.

This was Red Crest.

What! the man whom he had helped to swing over a beam still alive, and capable of taking human life with the revolver?

The Indian was superstitious; he could not believe all of Moravy's narrative.

A spirit, not a living being, had entered the cave and taken Antenat's life.

But, thought the Sioux a moment later, the guards lassoed something tangible; they dragged it into the cavern, and it was this person who shot and killed.

Red Crest, if questioned about the matter at that time, would have told the story of Deadly Dan's hanging.

But the Vigilantes did not bother with him; they declared with one accord that the first cord had been placed around Dan's neck by the young lynch, and more than one cursed him for bungling the job.

"The Wolf of the Rosebud has come among us," said Maverick Joe. "Fate or Providence sent him here, for somebody to hang." The boy saw him first and tried to do the job, but something befriended the fiend. He went from the gallows and stained his hands anew with Antenat's blood. He scattered old Louie's brains right and left. Now, Vigilantes of Custer, you've got another tiger to hunt—one that the Government curses, for when he burned the Injun town on the Rosebud, he sowed the seeds for one of them nasty little Injun wars that has cost Uncle Sam dearly. For my part I'd rather catch Deadly Dan than Tom Terror, though heaven knows that I'd sooner pull the White Spider up than open an Emma King. What do you say, Indian?"

Red Crest started as Maverick Joe whirling upon him shot the question squarely into his face.

The Sioux's little eyes seemed to emit sparks of fire.

"Catch 'm by-'m-by," said the Indian.

"By and by? Why not now?" roared the Vigilante captain. "Where is that chum of yours? Come, come, Red Crest, don't deny that you're not cheek by jowl with the chap who single-handed has hanged more deserving scamps than all the lynching Committees of Colorado."

The heavy hand of Maverick Joe lay on the Indian's shoulder; but there was a good-natured twinkle in his eyes, which told Red Crest that he had nothing to fear from the men by whom he was surrounded.

"Make the Injun tell!" shouted a dozen voices.

"Don't you hear the boys?" said Maverick Joe. "You're the only red-skin who has ever been admitted to our councils. We kinder like you, for ef you rskin is red, you've got the biggest heart that ever thumped ag'in the sides of an Injun's life-chest."

But Red Crest kept his lips sealed.

For what purpose did these lawless men want to know Judge Lynch, Jr.'s, whereabouts? Time and again they had sworn vengeance against him; they had even hunted him among the shadows of Cutthroat.

"Boys, that's grit in Red Crest," said the Vigilante captain as he sent a smile among his impatient men. "He hasn't got a spark of betrayal in him. We couldn't force it from him with pistol or rope. All honor to this red specimen of creation for that. But," and he turned to the Indian again, "but what if we want to clasp hands with the boy? what if Maverick Joe and his boysshould swear that they wouldn't touch a hair of his head:—would you take us to him?"

The Indian's eyes began to sparkle.

"Now, boys, listen to Maverick Joe," cried that worthy, and a great but agile leap took him upon the counter, boots and all, while a wild cheer rose from the rough fellows who clustered beneath him. "I'm in for bringing this man-hunt of ours to an end at once. We've hunted up and down Cutthroat night after night, and what have we done? Wiped out one man and got Louie killed! Exchanged a diamond for a dog. Now hyar's a proposition, and I want Red Crest to take in every syllable."

The Indian, who had not removed his eyes from Maverick Joe for a second, made a sign for him to proceed.

"I propose that the boy take command of the

Vigilantes of Custer—that we swear to follow whar he leads—that we stand by 'im through thick and thin, and let him hang when he wants to. That's the ticket that Maverick puts into the box. Boys, I want Cutthroat cleaned out. When the Mining Commission comes hyar to report on our wealth, I want 'em to ride through that grand old canyon and never feel any of them infernal strings around their silken necks. That's Cutthroat, boys, the glory of Colorado, it's a real canyon of the gods, and I say, put the boy at the head of the Vigilantes of Custer, and change its name to Paradise Gap, or something else that don't suggest wiping out!"

The men with a wild shout of approval on their lips could hardly wait until Maverick Joe concluded, but when he clinched the sentence by a mighty sweep of his arm, a cheer rose that fairly shook the building.

"That's the way the men of Custer do business," continued Joe, addressing the young Sioux whose expression told that he had not allowed a single word to escape him. "Now go and tell your chum that that's twenty-nine men what'll back up his court, and they forty arms are ready to pull when he gives the word. Maverick Joe is captain of the death-men of Colorado no longer. He resigns in favor of the boy!"

A cry of gratitude fell from the Indian's lips, and on the impulse of the moment he started back as if about to bear the message to his companion.

"Hold on! we'll saddle first," said Maverick Joe, clutching the Sioux's arm. "You can take us to him just as easy as you could fetch him hyar. He will not reject the proposition."

"No! he does not reject it. He will be proud to lead such men as Maverick Joe commands!"

The sound of that voice startled every one, and Maverick Joe, leaping from the counter, sprung toward the door.

"The boy! The Captain of the Vigilantes of Custer!" he cried. "Men, salute yer leader."

By this time, every eye in the house was fastened upon the handsome, proud-faced boy who stood in the doorway, viewing with pride the stalwart fellows who were ready to follow wherever he might lead.

At Joe's command every hat was doffed, and wild cries of delight accompanied a score of sombreros to the ceiling.

It was an ovation which a general might have coveted.

"You want me to lead you, men of Custer?" said Harry, the lynch, as he came forward and stood beside his faithful ally, Red Crest. "I have unintentionally heard your leader's speech. I came to Custer to find my red friend; but I did not expect to be compelled to seek him at your head-quarters. I am at your service. If you will follow, I will lead, and I swear to you that when we turn our faces westward again, we will leave Cutthroat behind tenanted only by the dead. I shall bind you to nothing. As I have listened to Maverick's words, I know that I am to be obeyed. There is one man whom I want to hang."

"Only one, captain?" cried Maverick. "Why, that must be two, at least, the lodge-burner from the Rosebud, and the fiend who carried off our rope last summer."

"I am afraid that Old Jack sent his crazy bullet home," was the reply.

"So the old fellow is going around shooting, with death in his vitals!"

"He tried his hand on Tom, and I fear with steriling success."

"Then, out o' the one hanging we'll make up for the disappointment. Now, captain, we are at your orders."

For a moment the boy leader's keen eyes swept the score of bronzed faces before him. Then he stepped forward.

"To saddle!" he said, in a voice of command. "The Thugs of Cutthroat are desperate as starving wolves. Let every man remember this. They may not be death with their strings, in every instance, but with the rifle and the revolver they never miss. So, avengers of Colorado, I grant you five minutes for good-byes to wives and sweethearts."

"I don't think that's a chap hyar who owns any such property!" cried Maverick Joe. "Least wise, that's only sixty women in Custer, an' they b'long to luckier fellars. No kissing when we go to battle, captain."

A smile passed over Harry's face as he turned away, and two minutes later he sat in the brilliant starlight at the head of that avenging band, some of whom looked upon the city of the Black Hills for the last time that night.

"Somebody's going to be hurt!" said Mav-

erick Joe, as he leaned over to the stern-faced horseman on his left. "But that ain't all. We are going to know something about that big bonanza that Old Jack is after. I feel it in my bones, and I want to see the end of his story about his lost child. If I'm not mistaken, we're not a thousand miles from that little one now."

Instinctively the Vigilante addressed turned his face to their boy leader whose well-formed figure was admirably posed on his handsome gray horse.

"Halt!"

The column obeying the command stopped before the man could reply to Maverick Joe.

The boy lynch turned to Moravy the guide, and asked:

"Can you take us to the cave to-night?"

"I can."

"It will shelter all?"

"All!"

"Now we must muffle."

Thirty-one figures sprung to the ground, and the task of muffling the horses' hoofs was soon completed.

Then into Cutthroat dashed the white avengers.

Moravy led the way to the cave where Deadly Dan had spilled the creole's blood, and all entered.

But silence kept before them.

Moravy turned pale.

"I left Lilly hyar," he exclaimed. "He swore to stay; but I do not hear him."

"Strike a light," said Maverick. "I know Jerome Lilly. He is hyar!"

The Vigilante's confidence in Lilly had not been misplaced, as the light of the lucifer revealed.

" Didn't I say he was hyar?" said Maverick, pointing to the body swinging from a sharp rock that jutted from the wall like a human arm. "I've known 'im fur forty years. He never deserted a post of duty. But he died at his last one."

Lilly was dead, and when one of the avengers severed the lariat that suspended him in mid-air, one of his tightly clenched hands opened, and some glittering object fell to the floor.

"Ah! what is this?" exclaimed Harry, picking up the object which had rolled to his feet. "Bless me, if it isn't a ring!"

"Oh, yes, Brown Louie found it in Cutthroat," said Moravy, recognizing the ring.

"Well, I happen to know the owner, so I'll see that it gets home," replied the boy judge, but in his eyes as they remained fixed upon the bauble, there was a look suggestive both of mystery and discovery.

"We're getting near the end," said Maverick to himself. "If I'm not mistaken, old Jack would give his claim to the big bonanza just for one look at that yellow toy!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DEPTHS OF CUTTHROAT.

"DIDN'T I strike a blow for the big bonanza? I reckon that I've thrown the hull claim into one share. Ha! ha! they can carry the carcass off, an' stow it away somewhar, for ef Maverick an' his men found it they'd give it the rope anyhow."

With wild eyes, flashing with triumph, Jack Drivewell sat once more on his horse, his haggard face turned toward Cutthroat.

He did not look like a sane man; there was the unmistakable make-up of the lunatic about him.

We have seen how he startled Maverick Joe and his band in the canyon in the first dim flushes of dawn, and again we heard his voice while the boy lynch and Tom Terror stood face to face.

There were stains of blood on his breast; his own mad hands had attended to his wound; but it was his iron constitution, coupled to a determination that overruled all other considerations, that kept him in the saddle.

He had shot the Gulch Tiger in order to put out of his road a claimant to the imaginary bonanza which fired his brain. Now he would go on and possess it, and become one of the gold kings of the coast.

Such were the wild intangible dreams that filled mad Jack's brain; but he believed them as tangible as the revolver his long fingers clutched.

"Mebbe I'm goin' from the bonanza," he said starting. "Tom wouldn't hev come back ef it warn't somewhar in these parts; he wouldn't hang around hyar ef it war away off on the coast. Steady, steady, old Jack! When you've got yer fingers on the yellow rocks, you'll hunt

up the baby and make her the gold queen of 'Frisco."

As if spurred on by some new impulse he turned his steed, and was soon galloping back to the canyon. His soft sombrero ready to drop from his head, revealed his wealth of gray hairs, and gave him a half grotesque appearance.

"The queen of 'Frisco!" he repeated as if his thoughts for the nonce had wandered from the big bonanza to a new and absorbing idea. "Ha! hal won't she shine in a coach an' four, gold harness and silver spokes? An' she'll be Jack's little queen, an' Jack will be the Honorable Jack from 'Frisco. All this when I stake off the big claim!" and he laughed gleefully till the woods rung with the discordant cachinnation.

A few moments later the shadows of Cutthroat seemed to swallow him, but down among them the strong stage horse bore his mad old master.

If the Thugs had returned to the canyon half an hour after the shooting of their leader, they would have seen a solitary horseman at the tragic spot. His insane eyes were fixed upon a dark stain among the white pebbles. It was where Tom Terror had fallen.

And while the man looked, his lips murmured a score of disconnected sentences; but among them were strangely commingled "gold queen," "big bonanza," and "one share."

Had Jack a lingering doubt of the success of his shot?

When he moved away it was to follow the trail of blood which, had he kept on, would have taken him to scenes we have already described; but seeing that it ascended to the top of the canyon, he gave up the track and rode moodily off.

He had a doubt, but, mad as he was, he knew better than to encounter the devils whose leader he had stricken.

So among the shaded caverns of the old canyon, the bona-za-hunter buried himself; but when the first star peeped through the blue canopy of heaven upon the earth once more, grim and morose, like death on his pale horse, he came forth, and halting by the dark wall seemed to wait for his prey.

He sat there statue-like and stern until a sound startled him, and made his eyes flash.

Quick as a flash of lightning he drew his revolvers and leaned forward.

But the next instant he started back, and hugged the canyon wall. In that position he sat and held his breath while Captain Harry and his Vigilantes rode past entirely unconscious of his presence.

"The boy an' Maverick together?" he repeated twenty times. "What does it mean? Ah, if I thought they war huntin' the big bonanza I'd hev asserted my right to the whole claim."

The Vigilantes moved on, their hoof-beats did not rouse the echoes of the canyon; but Old Jack still occupied his halting-place.

"The Wolf ar' on the trail," he said half aloud, leaning forward again and trying to pierce the starlight that rendered the pebbles and pieces of rock objects of grim grotesque-ness.

"Ha! these are the Wolves who follow the hunter of the big bonanza," flashed the old man as his restless eyes discerned the three creeping objects that came down the gap as if on the trail of Maverick Joe and Captain Harry. "They don't want the baby to be the gold queen. Ha! ha! Old Jack will see that they never get to break a spoke of the gold carriage!"

As he spoke two pistols crept past his horse's ears and then, with a loud cry of rage, he touched the triggers and sent a deafening report through the cavern.

At the shots two half-naked figures sprung into the air, and fell back, while the third turned, and shot away like an arrow sent swiftly from an Indian bow.

"I'm making the claim sure!" ejaculated Old Jack. "Two more spokes for the silver wheels! Hurrah for the big bonanza of Colorado!"

He was on the ground with the last word on his lips, and his eyes flashed with a fiercer light when he recognized the figures lying in the starlight.

They were the bodies of stalwart Indians, and from the belt of each dangled a dark cord and a leaden ball!

Old Jack, with a saneless laugh, tore the fatal strings away, and held them up in the starlight in great glee. He shook them till they became hopelessly tangled, and laughed to hear the little balls strike together.

But all at once one of the figures on the ground moved spasmodically, and a pair of sav-

age eyes became riveted upon the bonanza-hunter. This the old man did not perceive; he saw nothing but the whirling, tangled cords of death.

"Ha! ba!" he laughed, in the same strain. "The gold queen will astonish 'Frisco. And Old Jack will run a bank in the heart of the big bonanza."

The next moment the gleaming eyes on the ground seemed to leap up like a pair of rockets, and with a startling cry the old man went back with a human tiger at his breast.

It is needless to say that the deadly cords fell from his hand; as they touched the ground he threw out his long arms and grappled with the foe.

His madness seemed to lend the ex-driver strength, and as the two combatants swayed and at fro, they seemed almost equally matched.

Now against the rocks they went, now out into starlight, fighting and tearing each others' throats like Kilkenny cats.

Once Old Jack gained a vantage and forced his enemy loose; but with the far-famed agility of his race, the Indian recovered in an instant, and his scarlet claws tore open the driver's jacket, and wrenched the dressing from his wound.

Jack felt his heart-strings yield, as it were, as the bandages gave way, and the stars seemed to resolve themselves into a golden mist before his eyes.

"The greaser's gettin' the one share," gasped the old hunter. "Ar' Old Jack never to see the gold queen in her carriage? Is—this—the chimney—the chimney—of the—big bonanza?"

His fingers clutched a stretch of bleeding throat, but they dropped away, and he would have fallen from the Indian's hands if they had released him.

A smile of triumph fluttered over the Thug's face, and a blade of steel, till then unused, flashed in the starlight.

A moment later it descended like a swift-winged bolt of death, and was buried in the breast of the bona-za-hunter.

The reply to that merciless stroke was a groan, and Jack, released, fell at the feet of his horse, the sole living witness of that terrific struggle.

But there was another heart near by, at whose strings death was clutching.

The Thug dropped the knife as he drew it from his victim's breast, and reeled toward the nearest wall, against which he fell heavily.

Old Jack had fought with his hands alone; but they had served him well.

For, as the Indian cast his eyes upward as if to take a last, long look at the stars, the hideous gap in his throat was revealed, and the death-gurgle went down the canyon on the playful wind.

Then it was that he clutched wildly at the bare rock towering above his disordered crest, and with one loud cry, he went backward—dead!

Poor Jack! In the depths of Cutthroat, the big bonanza had been wrenched from him, and he would never see the gold queen dazzle the denizens of the coast.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHADOW OF THE NOOSE.

ALL through the day which came after the night that witnessed the surprise of Myra, the waif, by Tom Terror and his Thugs, six Wolves watched with the fatal cord in their hands for the return of the boy lynchier.

But he did not come.

Back in the cavern proper, with that ghastly coloring which comes to the faces of the dying, the white Thug reclined on the rude cot. His wound had been roughly but well dressed, and the gentle hands of the girl of mystery had moistened his lips with water.

Night came again; the long, gloomy shadows of the bare cliffs that fringed the top of the narrow ravine darkened the mouth of the cave once more, and made the red watchers creep to the very threshold.

Surely night would bring the boy judge back.

All at once the fair girl started, for an Indian had leaped to the cot, and was talking in low tones to the wounded Thug.

Her heart seemed to stand still. She felt that Harry was coming, that he was about to walk into the death-trap which cunning had prepared for him.

How she strained her ears to catch a sentence, a word of the Indian's communication. As well might she have listened for the sound of a zephyr! But she saw the giant's eyes flash while his hireling talked; she caught the quick nod of approval that he gave, and saw the Thug bound toward the entrance again.

Then followed twenty minutes of indescribable suspense, during which her eyes remained fixed on the nearest red figure crouched along the wall.

Harry did not come. That was exquisite pleasure to the waif's heart.

Suddenly the Indian who had spoken to Tom Terror came back. His breaths were gasps, and he smiled grimly as he held a shattered wrist before his leader's eyes.

The few quick, mad words that fell from his lips made the Gulch Tiger spring from the cot.

"Where's the use in lyin' hyar when all my enemies ar' in Cutthroat?" he thundered. "The hand of death is at my life-lock, but before it picks it that shall be a general pipin' out down below. So he's come back after the big bonanza? Wal, I'll give it to 'im before I'm planted. Go an' git the hoses. I'm still old Tom Terror, the man o' many tricks, ef death hes staked a claim on my property!"

There was someting so ferocious and unnatural in that vagabond's mien that Myra involuntarily shrunk away. The four Thugs bounded back as if to carry out the command the chief had uttered.

"Why don't Dan come back?" continued the cutthroat. "I recollect now he left shortly after he saw the mole on the gal's face. But why did he leave her hyar? He's been huntin' that little spot for ten years, an' it's cost 'im blood. Now he goes off. Does he expect me to put the big bonanza in his hands?"

Myra heard but few of these words, still she heard enough to know that Tom Terror was talking about her. In her eagerness to know more she could hardly restrain herself; she wanted to rush forward and beg him to tell her all he knew before he left.

For did not Harry say that he knew Deadly Dan's secret? and was he not going away with death at his heart-strings to encounter foes who would show no quarter?

She started when he spoke of the Wolf of the Rosebud. During the day just passed she had not caught a glimpse of him. Once in the night she awoke from feverish slumber to behold him, gazing down into her face with a great deal of triumph and revenge, and while her startled eyes regarded him, he turned suddenly away.

"I believe he has deserted his companions," flashed across Myra's mind. "It is I who drove him off. He did not expect to find me here. I believe he hates himself for saving me from the Thugs last night, and now he has abandoned me to their mercy."

She was thinking thus when the sound of voices near the mouth of the cave startled Tom Terror and drove him forward.

"The time has come!" she heard him say as if the words gave him a sort of wolfish pleasure. "That's to be a good deal of dyin' with boots on in the old Cutthroat. What's the gal?"

"Here, Captain Tom," answered Myra, and the next moment she stood before the robber of the gulch from whom a few hours since she would have fled with a shriek.

"So hyar ye ar'!" he said. "I'm goin', never to come back. I'll never pull my boots off ag'in. Stay hyar till somebody comes; it won't be me; it won't be Deadly Dan. But, somebody will come an' take you away. You're the biggest bonanza in Colorado, ef you ar' but a mite. One o' these days you'll be a gold queen. Dan got on the wrong trail, an' now he's run away from the right one. Run off an' left the work for my boys with the cords. I told 'im to give you the strings last night, but I'm kinder glad that Rosebud interfered, an' saved yer life."

The old fellow dropped Myra's hand, and started toward the mouth of the cave where two bronze faces waited for him; but the girl bounded forward.

"You haven't disclosed anything!" she cried. "What you have said makes me curious. Whose child am I? Captain Tom, will you not lift the veil of mystery that has hung before me so long? Who is the boy?"

"The boy?" and Tom Terror grated his teeth. "Oh, the young 'un what has carried on court in Cutthroat for six months?"

"Yes, yes!"

"He's nobody in partic'lar. You're the mystery, gal. Thar!"

The Gulch Tiger tore himself away, and as he bounded forward he left the waif standing in the firelight a beautiful statue of bewilderment.

"Me the mystery?" she cried. "Am I about to see somebody who is able to tell me who I am? What did he say about the gold queen? Oh, he did not know what he was saying. That awful wound has turned his head. He is going

out to die—to throw himself in his rage perhaps upon Harry, and—then—then—”

The thought of the terrible scenes that might soon populate the chasm rushed upon the girl's mind faster than she could speak. They came like the pictures of some mighty panorama, and when in one she saw Harry the avenger struck down by the man he had sworn to hang, she reeled away with a cry of horror.

When she recovered, the cavern was still. The fire burning brightly on the stone floor told her that she was the only tenant of the cave. The silence was oppressive.

“Can I not see something from the rock?” she exclaimed. “It would kill me to remain here while the last dread encounter was taking place in Cutthroat. I will go! Heaven grant that harm may not come to them. But did Captain Tom not say that, even when Old Jack fired that shot he had a bullet somewhere in his own breast?”

The waif of the gap hurried from the cave, and a few moments later she was gliding through the shadows of the ravine with which she was thoroughly acquainted.

Clutching the rock already mentioned, she leaned over the wall and cast her eyes into the depths of the canyon.

“That deathly silence is ominous,” she said. “They are somewhere down there, lying in ambush like tigers for their prey. This awful suspense will not end to-night. I must wait longer for the solution of the mystery. Maybe Harry will come, and then—”

The girl sprung back with a startling cry; the thunderous report of firearms had broken the silence and the flash almost blinded her.

Again and again the shots sent her warm blood like lava through her heart; she heard oaths, cries, the wild struggling of enemies in deadly combat.

They had met!

But who were the white men whose voices assailed her ears?

Ah! Tom Terror and his Thugs had encountered Maverick Joe and his Vigilantes; not the boy lynchier.

Myra took hope at this; she once more returned to the rock; she leaned forward; but the smoke of that short battle was blown into her face.

The Vigilantes had conquered; their voices told her this, and she wanted to send down to them her approval of their success.

But something checked her. Those men hated the boy lynchier. They had even hunted him, and she—she could not admire such men.

“I will go back and wait,” she said. “Harry will come now. I wonder if they slew Captain Tom. Why, of course they did. Maverick Joe and his men are merciless! They are fiends.”

Myra turned from the rock, but the next instant she found herself face to face with a figure that brought a cry to her lips.

“Here you are, my beauty! By Jove! they've been settling matters down in the gulch. I thought you were gone when I found the cave empty; but here you are, the girl to make the gold queen of the eastern coast.”

The waif saw the glitter of the man's eyes; she listened half-dazed to his triumphant words and drew back when his hand touched her.

“Not so fast,” he hissed, springing forward. “Now that I've found the right trail I propose to profit by it. I'm Deadly Dan out here; but back among the nabobs of the Atlantic coast I'm the cultivated society beau, who, by one stroke at this minute, could become a millionaire! Don't look at me as if you'd dagger me with those pretty eyes, girl. You'll get used to Dan Darrell when I have made you the gold queen of New York.”

“You!” gasped Myra. “Must I owe the solution of the mystery to you?”

“The mystery?” he laughed. “Yes, there is a mystery. We all thought the lost baby was a boy; but here ends the trail. I stand before the eyes we have hunted so long. The little mole on your forehead is worth more than one million, Jennie.”

The waif uttered an ejaculation of amazement.

“Jennie? That was the name engraved on the ring.”

“Ah, you have it, then?”

“No. I lost it. I dropped it from the cliffs into Cutthroat a long time ago.”

Deadly Dan's countenance fell.

“But the mole will prove enough,” he said. “Come, my golden bird. Some of those booted fellows down there might interfere with my plans. Thunder and guns! it was a desperate battle. The Thugs waited for Maverick. They gave him the strings, and then opened upon his

ranks with their revolvers. I never saw such shooting; it outdid our famous fight on the Rosebud. But they won't hang Captain Tom; that's certain.”

“Are you certain about your own neck, Deadly Dan?”

The villain stopped and dropped the hand that he held; then his revolver leaped upward, but the report which followed quickly upon the question, caused it to fall as suddenly.

“Draw again and I'll spoil your face!” said the deadly marksman. “I have just closed one session of court, and now I will open the last one I shall ever hold in Cutthroat. Stand where you are! This time Red Crest and I will see that the noose is properly adjusted. Jennie—Myra—go on into the cave; there's somebody there who wants to see you.”

The girl sprung forward with a parting look at Deadly Dan.

That villain bit his lips; the prize for which he had trailed and shot for ten years was gliding from his grasp.

“Now, devil, I am ready,” he said, fiercely, his eyes turned upon the boy captain. “I know all now. I've been on the wrong trail. You've won the prize, but be careful lest they echer you out of it in New York. We will not parley about a secret this time, eh?”

“No!”

The boy turned as he spoke, and several figures came forward.

“So you have some men left, Maverick?” exclaimed Rosebud Dan, recognizing the Vigilante captain.

“Only thirteen!” was the grating answer.

“Gods! how they shot!”

“I've seen shootin' in my time, Rosebud; but Tom an' his Thugs war worse nor a dozen Gatlin's!” and the hand of the speaker fell on the human wolf's shoulder.

He was doomed to the rope once more.

CHAPTER XV.

A GOLD QUEEN AFTER ALL

“WHY did I come back to Cutthroat? War that what ye asked me, Maverick?” asked Tom Terror, as he looked down into the Vigilante's face from the saddle to which several of the red survivors of the gulch battle had helped him, bleeding from a fresh wound. “I see no harm in tellin' the why an' wherefore now. A big bonanza brought me back. Deadly Dan knows more about it than I do; but I know that a million or more is tremblin' in the balances on the Atlantic Coast. He sent me back to find an' to kill; but he thought he'd better come, too. Ha! ha! I'm afraid he'll never tech the rocks, for it turned out to be a gal.”

Captain Harry started at the man's words.

“A girl!” he ejaculated.

“Yes! your sweetheart. Did you think it war you?” and the wounded man smiled grimly. “Last night Rosebud found an' recognized her.”

“And did his work?”

“No; he ran off. But, mebbe he's back by this time. He'd rather see her the gold queen of the cities than use his knife, for she's purtier'n all creation.”

The Vigilantes looked at the boy.

“We can't talk here,” Harry said. “Are you ready, Tom?”

“My boots ar' on. Tharfore, Tom Terror ar' ready.”

Red Crest leaped forward at a sign from the boy, and the strong noose fell over the Tiger's drooping head.

“By Jove! you said you'd string me up sometime,” he said, lifting his heavy eyebrows. “But,” with a bitter laugh, “if you don't hurry up you'll hang a carcass.”

In less than a minute's time the lariat was thrown over the beam to which we have several times referred, and, as the horse, struck sharply, started forward, the body of the Terror of the Gap sprung into the air.

But vain, almost, was that long delayed vengeance, for when the death noose tightened around Tom's short stretch of throat, the soul of the ruffian had gone to be judged.

“Now for Myra!” cried the boy.

A scene totally unexpected greeted the eyes of the girl waif when she re-entered the cavern.

Stretched on the cot drawn close to the fire lay the body of a man whose face was haggard in the extreme. His eyes beaming with expectation, glittered intensely as the fair one appeared.

“I knew it!” he exclaimed. “Ef I hev lost

one big bonanza, I've found another; an' one, too, all in one share. Jennie! Jennie! come an' tell me thet the long-lost claim hev come back to old Jack!”

The girl did not hesitate, and the next moment, her gentle face was pressed to the rough cheek of the old driver.

There was no mad light in his eyes now; in its place beamed the tender and subdued look of fatherly affection.

“I knowed it would come,” said Maverick Joe feelingly. “Old Jack has found the big bonanza. Captain Tom would have hired him to hunt down his own child, ef Rosebud hadn't interfered.”

It was a scene from which the rough Vigilantes withdrew, and when the last one had departed they left the twain there with lip glued to lip. Sterner scenes called them away.

I feel that I need not describe what followed. It would be but the story of how a man who had staked his all on the throw of the dice, went to his death with a courage that is seldom imitated.

But, this let me say:

When the long arrows of dawn penetrated the recesses of Cutthroat Canyon, they fell upon two human bodies swinging side by side many feet above the whitened pebbles.

And beneath them, chalked on the somber wall, was the following:

NOTICE!

“The court which has been continually in session here during the last six months, is adjourned *sine die*. It has pursued, tried and executed, without show or favor. There are no more criminals within its jurisdiction to punish. And it decrees that Cutthroat Canyon be hereafter known as Paradise Gap.

“JUDGE LYNCH, JR.”

The change of name, as the reader no doubt suspects, was a suggestion from Maverick Joe, and three cheers echoed through the bloody gulch as the boy drew back to survey the notice.

When the party returned to the cavern they found Jennie—Myra no longer, that being the name by which Captain Harry knew her—seated beside the cot holding the dead hand of Bonanza Jack, her father.

His tale had been told; she knew all, and she told Harry that with his last breath he had thanked fortune for preserving his life until he had found his child.

After all vicissitudes she became a veritable gold queen, for the property left by her grandfather fell into her hands, and the conspirators, when at the threshold of success, found themselves baffled.

But there was one—the chief of the plotters—who would not pursue the heiress any longer. For when the vengeance of Judge Lynch, Jr., overtook him in the great canyon of Colorado, he met his doom.

By one rope—his former miraculous escape from a similar death he stubbornly refused to explain—the crimes of the Rosebud and Cutthroat were summarily expiated.

Here we must put aside the pen; but not until we have informed the reader that Maverick Joe, now a veritable gold bug, has just arrived from the West to witness a wedding ceremony, and to give the blushing bride away.

And if somewhere in the fashionable assembly the interesting face of a young Indian is seen, we may be sure that he is the gallant Red Crest of our canyon romance.

THE END.

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